

## All the Queen's Treasure

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## All the Queen's Treasure

by [dracoqueen22](#)

### Summary

After Sideswipe, Sunstreaker returns to Cybertron, lost and alone, until Bob leads him on a wild chase into the wildlands, to a nest beneath the surface of the planet, and a place Sunstreaker might call home.

### Notes

So this is a self-indulgent fic I started ages ago, finally sat down and finished, and now it's polished for public consumption. Please enjoy. ^\_^

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

It wasn't cowardice.

Sunstreaker had always hated Earth, even before its inhabitants fragged him up. It was organic and dirty, infested with tiny, filthy creatures who were far too curious for their own good. They stared, and they ogled, and they lusted, and Sunstreaker hated them.

He left not because of fear, but because there wasn't a reason to stay. Not anymore. He'd paid his dues and then some.

He went back to Cybertron. With the Lost Light vanished into space, and Optimus slowly going mad on Earth, there was nowhere else.

All Sunstreaker had was Bob now, and they didn't need to stay on Earth. There wasn't a place for them on an organic planet, mingling with Cybertronians who seemed to have no issue with the new war on the horizon. He wasn't about to join Soundwave's little gang of rejects either. Frag that.

Cybertron it was.

Cybertron still had memories, but it didn't have *Hunter* and *the Machination* and... and...

Sideswipe.

It held memories of his brother, but not memories of his brother dying. Slipping away. Lost to a dream.

There was only so much trauma Sunstreaker could absorb. He was tired of Earth. He hated Earth. He started to regret working so hard to save the damned planet. Nothing good had ever come of Earth for Cybertronians. It was anathema to them. Poison.

It was a place they did not belong.

No one tried to stop him from leaving. No one gave a cursory effort, except for Wrench to tell him it was a waste of energon to power the bridge. Sunstreaker didn't care. He was prepared to make a fuss as long as it needed to get him back to a place he belonged, even if only in part. He didn't want to be on Earth.

Optimus, in a moment of clarity, passed the order on. Sunstreaker doubted he'd paid much attention to who had sent the request.

Sunstreaker was one soldier among hundreds. In the grand scheme of things, he mattered to no one and nothing. Once, he might have mattered to Sideswipe.

He didn't matter now.

They let him go.

He stepped back on Cybertron feeling as lost as he did on Earth, but at least he wasn't surrounded by organics. At least Cybertron looked the way he felt: destroyed, lost, abandoned, lonely.

Ironhide welcomed him. He patted Sunstreaker roughly on the shoulder, grunted 'welcome home' and offered Sunstreaker a job. He pointed out the buildings they'd been refurbishing into living spaces and told Sunstreaker there was plenty of work to go around. Plenty to keep him busy.

He didn't ask about Sideswipe.

Sunstreaker didn't know if he was glad for it, or angry Ironhide hadn't bothered to remember. Maybe a little bit of both. Sunstreaker's relationship with people was complicated.

He settled on Cybertron. He picked out an apartment on the bottom floor so he wouldn't have to worry about Bob taking a dive out an open window or balcony. He scrounged in the ruins like everyone else to find furniture and random bits to decorate. He took on odd jobs where extra hands were needed. Sometimes, he pretended to socialize at the bars scattered around the makeshift city.

There was always time for engex.

Ironhide was busy. Ironhide had a purpose. Sunstreaker didn't see Ironhide much.

It was still better than Earth.

Cybertron was the closest thing Sunstreaker had to home.

~

Bob was weird.

He was an Insecticon. An Insecticon runt to be more precise, so Sunstreaker had considered it a given that Bob was weird. There were a lot of things Bob did that Sunstreaker dismissed because, well, Bob was weird.

He was cute. And adorable. And loyal. And the best friend Sunstreaker ever had.

But he was still fragging weird.

Spending the past week staring off into the horizon, his little antennae quirked and an odd sound echoing in his chassis, didn't change Sunstreaker's opinion about the bug at all.

Bob could barely focus on any task for longer than a handful of minutes. Frag, the cute bugger got bored when eating if something wandered into view to distract him.

So to see him so focused on absolutely nothing, staring off into the distance, it was weirder than weird.

Sunstreaker tried asking Flatline about it, but the formerly Decepticon medic had his hands full with wounded and new arrivals, and didn't give two creds about Sunstreaker's pet Insecticon. None of the medics were interested. So what if an Insecticon runt was feeling weird.

Bob wasn't bleeding. He wasn't in pain. He had all of his limbs. Bob would be fine. He could wait. This mech here with the cracked spark chamber was higher on the priority list.

Sunstreaker missed Ratchet.

He tried not to worry. Bob was weird. That was the way things went. Maybe he was as rattled by the Metroformers fighting as everyone else. Maybe he was twitchy because all of Cybertron was twitchy. Maybe the journey to Earth and all of that disaster was as hard on him as it was on Sunstreaker.

And maybe, when Sunstreaker was taking a long walk around the periphery of the newly settled Metrotitan they called home, maybe Bob decided enough was enough.

He chirped and took off as if the entirety of the Decepticon army was on his heels. He raced into the night, ignoring Sunstreaker as he hollered after Bob, even going so far as to snarl the much-dreaded “bad boy!”

Nothing. No response. Bob continued to run helter-skelter, and Sunstreaker had a choice. He could let Bob go, or he could give chase.

Bob was the only person in the world he could rely on. Bob was the only one who truly cared. Bob was all he had left.

Sunstreaker didn't want to be alone.

Ironhide chirped his comm as he ran, and Sunstreaker answered it without thinking. “Where ya goin', kid?”

Good old Ironhide. The only one who gave a rip anymore. Must've been tracking Sunstreaker's GPS or something, keeping an optic on him. Or maybe Sunstreaker had tripped some perimeter sensor.

“Bob's acting fragged. Dunno why. I'm gonna get him back,” Sunstreaker said as he leapt off a roof, skidded down a broken wall, tumbled into a roll and transformed mid-way, putting pedal to the metal, chassis bouncing over a very battered road.

Bob was fast when he wanted to be. But Sunstreaker in alt-mode was faster. Well, when he had a flat surface unmarred by debris. Given the current state of Cybertron's roads, he had to be cautious or risk tearing into his undercarriage. Bob didn't have any such concerns.

This was going to be a hard chase.

“Be careful.” Ironhide was gruff, but Sunstreaker heard the affection as much as the warning in his tone. “Don't get yerself killed again, ya hear? I don't wanna come after ya.”

Sunstreaker grinned. “Loud and clear, rust-aft.”

He didn't know if Ironhide heard him. The comm cut off with a crackle as if Sunstreaker had gone out of range. He'd heard that communication out here could be iffy, but he thought they'd fixed that once they stopped Shockwave's plan. Apparently, it was one thing that wasn't Shockwave's fault. Who knew?

Bob remained on his sensors, albeit just out of reach. Sunstreaker didn't know what crawled up the bug's aft, but like frag would he let Bob go. He'd get tired eventually.

Sunstreaker hoped.

The road vanished. Sunstreaker was forced to revert to root-mode, his luxury alt-mode not built for rough terrain. He cursed his own lack of foresight, and worried he'd never catch Bob at this rate.

Except Bob must have noticed Sunstreaker transform. He slowed down, still keeping ahead of Sunstreaker, but at a slower pace now. It felt less like he was running away, and more like he was leading Sunstreaker somewhere.

What the frag was he up to?

The Metrotitan vanished into a dark blob behind him, far beyond the reach of any comm signal. Fatigue clawed at Sunstreaker. His stamina wasn't what it used to be, and besides, war had never

demanded a constant flight over rough terrain. It was short bursts of intense battle, followed by long periods of waiting.

Twilight overtook the sky. Ahead, dark and shadowed lumps gave rise to mountains. Sunstreaker couldn't remember their name. The ground became pockmarked with cracks and holes, the lingering stench of fall out clinging to the air. Sunstreaker was forced to slow to a fast walk, exasperation and exhaustion hissing through his vents.

"Damn it, Bob!" he snarled, his voice carrying an unnatural distance over the empty landscape. His armor crawled with unease. "Get back here, you stupid bug!"

Bob paused at a ridge, near enough Sunstreaker could see him, but too far to begrabbed. His antennae quivered; his aft wriggled as if they were playing a game. He looked at Sunstreaker, and then he tipped his head back and made a sound Sunstreaker had never heard.

It was a cross between a chirp and a song. It rose and fell in waves, like some unknown language. Sunstreaker's armor vibrated as if resonating with it.

What the frag?

The ground rumbled beneath Sunstreaker. He skidded to a halt, blaster leaping to his fingers, his sensors casting out wide and far. He detected movement, lots of it, all around him. Beneath him, to the sides, front and back, but at least, not above. He was surrounded.

The sky grew darker, as if something had come along to swallow the last of the sun, and all of the starlight. Sunstreaker's spark quivered. He swallowed over a lump in his intake, realizing suddenly how very alone he was.

Bob went silent. He chirruped and bounded down from the rise, scuttling across the ground straight for Sunstreaker.

A loud, ominous crack echoed through the air. The shuddering had an epicenter right beneath his feet. Sunstreaker had a single astrosecond to think that maybe chasing Bob was a very bad idea, before the ground crumbled and swallowed him whole.

The last thing he saw was Bob, bright optics and quivering antennae as he leapt toward Sunstreaker, and the distant peek of stars in a darkening sky.

And then he was falling, tumbling around, debris pattering his armor. The sky vanished as the hole sealed itself up behind him. He scrambled for something, anything, to arrest his fall. His blaster tumbled from his fingers, lost to the dark.

He hit something, and his head smacked into something else. Static blitzed his vision. His audials rang, and through the roaring noise, he swore he heard an unsettlingly familiar sound. That of thousands upon thousands of skittering feet, and their accompanying chirping chatter.

It was one of many nightmares come back to haunt him until unconsciousness took the rest.

~

Sunstreaker online slowly, his head throbbing and his self-repair furiously at work. Remarkably, the only registered damage was superficial. Scrapes. Dents. Dings. A rather large bump to the back of his head.

He was alive.

Static circled his processor. His audio feed pinged back garbled information. Odd noises, half-familiar, half-foreign. He reset his optics again and again, but could only gather shadows and gray fuzz.

Sunstreaker groaned and tried to move, but moving took effort, like swimming through tar. Sluggish thoughts banged together, uncoordinated.

“We welcome you. You who are here. Here at last.”

Words trickled through the hazy static, oddly clear. Sunstreaker did not recognize the voice. It had an odd, musical cadence.

He groaned again and managed to sling an arm over his optics. His armor prickled. He lay on something hard and cold, definitely not a berth.

He remembered falling. He remembered chasing Bob. He remembered the bug being weird, as bugs do.

Sunstreaker tried to move, and his processor swam again. He dizzily dropped back down as the whispering, skittering noise rose around him in a wave.

“Who’s there? Where am I?” he demanded, but his voice came out as a crackle, and had no weight behind it.

He rebooted his optics again, and more light filtered through. His sensors registered a humid environment, the air thick and still, with the occasional waft to tickle his dermal net.

“Shhh. Quiet now. You are safe. Safe here. Here with us.”

Us?

Sunstreaker looked around, his vision hazy. All he could see were dark blobs of color, streaks of biolights, and pinpoints of brightness, optics and optical visors.

There was a mech beside him. He was massive, nearly twice Sunstreaker’s size, and loomed over Sunstreaker’s prone frame with ease. His voice was deep, guttural, and something around him clicked. Chittered. Like Bob.

“Bob?”

“He is here. Here beside you. Look.”

Dizzy, Sunstreaker managed to sit up, though his processor lurched. He reached out, only to hear a familiar chirp and for a head to bump against his palm. Little hands patted his thighs.

“Bug,” Sunstreaker murmured, relief coursing through him. “There you are, you silly thing. Why’d you run?”

“Because we called. Called him here. Here to us.”

Us.

Sunstreaker shook his head. He rebooted his sensory suites, and when he unshuttered his optics, his vision was less hazy. Shadows still surrounded him; he suspected because there was little lighting.

He looked up at the speaker. He stiffened.

Though still bathed in shadow, the dark shape was clearer now. An Insecticon towered over Sunstreaker, his large mandibles more than enough to present a threat. There were two parallel marks cut across his face, seemingly intentional, and where there should have been optics, a yellow band gleamed down at him.

Which meant...

Sunstreaker carefully looked around, swallowing his terror. The shapes coalesced. The walls shuffled and hissed and clicked and whirred. Biolights pulsed. Optics flickered. Visors glowed with unreadable intent.

He was surrounded by Insecticons. He was in an Insecticon Hive. He was alive, in an Insecticon Hive. They could have killed him, but they didn't.

Why?

"There. You see. See you are safe. Safe with us," the Insecticon said.

"Am I?" Sunstreaker asked. He dared swing his legs over the side of the platform. It was an interesting berth, but not one he wanted to keep using. It felt too much like some kind of sacrificial altar.

No one tried to stop him. Grit rained from his armor. He didn't have to look to know his finish was in an appalling state.

No. Focus on more important things right now.

Sunstreaker swayed on his feet. Bob scuttled across the pseudo-berth and head-butted him in the back. He purred. His little hands patted Sunstreaker's back as though trying to reassure him.

"Yes." The large Insecticon shifted his weight, his visor following Sunstreaker but nothing else.

"Why?" Sunstreaker glanced around, hoping to quell the fear shuddering through his spark.

He was on some kind of raised platform in the middle. Insecticons of various shapes and sizes clustered on every inch of the surrounding walls and ceiling. They were fixated on Sunstreaker, watching without motion. They made quiet noises, the occasional rustle of their frames, but otherwise clung unmoving.

It was too dark to see much of anything. But beyond his right shoulder, he thought he could see a long tunnel.

"You will be one. One of us," the Insecticon said and he lifted a hand, his clawed fingers reaching toward Sunstreaker, who had nowhere to go but back against the slab.

The tip of a primary talon touched his chestplate, just below his Autobot badge, and it rested there.

"You," the Insecticon droned, "are needed."

Sunstreaker frowned. Bob nudged his backplate. "For what?"

"We are a Hive without a Queen."

That voice came from behind Sunstreaker. The talon slid away from his chestplate, the Insecticon in front of him withdrawing with a dip of his head.

Sunstreaker whirled to see another Insecticon approaching. This one was even larger than the other, and he had three parallel scars across his face. Sunstreaker was certain they were intentional.

“The little one says you are a perfect fit,” the new Insecticon said as he moved around the pseudo-berth and closer to Sunstreaker, bringing heat with him, the gust of his ex-vents buffeting Sunstreaker’s frame. He’d come up from behind the platform, Insecticons parting for him, but they moved quickly to fill the gap.

It was unnerving to be the focus of that much undivided attention. Especially since Sunstreaker knew Insecticons loved to eat anything, but tended to favor living, Cybertronian metals.

“Little one?” Sunstreaker echoed. Maybe if he kept them talking, he could figure a way out of this intact.

The Insecticon raised a hand and gestured behind Sunstreaker, to Bob.

Sunstreaker blinked. “Bob doesn’t talk.”

A raspy laugh burbled out of the three-scarred Insecticon’s intake. “Not in words you understand. Not yet. But you will. Soon.”

Sunstreaker folded his arms over his chassis. His armor prickled. Unease clawed at his sensors. He was surrounded by the Enemy, but they had done him no apparent harm, and his coding couldn’t reconcile that.

“I am Hardshell,” the three-scarred Insecticon said, and like the other, he lifted a hand, but rather than prod Sunstreaker’s chestplate, he gestured down Sunstreaker’s frame. “And the little one is correct. You are perfect.”

Despite it all, a little thrill ran through Sunstreaker at the compliment. “Perfect, huh? Well, that’s true. But I’m not an Insecticon. So whatever you think I’m perfect for, you got the wrong mech.”

Hardshell tilted his chin, and if Sunstreaker could describe the Insecticon’s expression, he’d call it *smug*. “That can be changed.”

Nope. Nope. Sunstreaker didn’t like the sound of that. “No, thanks. I like me just the way I am.” He eased backward as his mapping algorithm refused to return with an escape route.

Frag.

“You misunderstand.” Hardshell chuckled, and it rattled out of his intake like one of Earth’s old, non-sentient vehicles struggling to start. “Come. I’ll show you. Once you understand, you’ll change your mind.”

Sunstreaker arched an orbital ridge. “And if I don’t, you’ll kill me, right?” He cycled a ventilation and glanced around him. “Just warning you, I’m pretty hard to kill, and I guarantee I’ll take a lot of you with me, and people will come looking, too. People who care about me and won’t be bothered by bombing the Pit out of this place when they do.”

Well, at least he hoped someone cared enough to come looking. Ironhide was too busy working with Starscream, but maybe he’d remember Sunstreaker for a minute. Arcee’s grief seemed more suffocating than Sunstreaker’s own.

And Sideswipe wasn’t around to care anymore. If he ever did.



“We will not kill you,” Hardshell said, and his tone was oddly... genuine? He almost sounded like he keeping Sunstreaker alive was the better option. “You will be returned to your kind as intact as you arrived.”

Sunstreaker squinted. “Really?”

Hardshell hunched forward as though in a bow, but tilted his head, baring the vulnerable column of his intake. “On the submission I offer you, yes.”

Whoa.

What the actual fuck?

Earth curses, Sunstreaker felt, were entirely appropriate in this moment.

Sunstreaker looked down where Bob half-leaned over the edge of the berth, his own head tilted, and his optics bright and cheerful. He chirruped at Sunstreaker, little hands waving at him as if asking for trust.

He was one of the few living beings in all the universe Sunstreaker still trusted.

“Fine,” Sunstreaker bit out. “Show me. Isn’t like I have anything better to do.” It would keep him alive, too, and give him an opportunity to find his escape.

The Insecticon straightened. “Very well.” He gestured to himself. “I have introduced myself already. Behind me is Sharpshot. Later, you will meet Kickback. And we three, my queen, are yours.”

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## Chapter 2

*And we three, my Queen, are yours.*

The words echoed in Sunstreaker's mind. They made him hunger for more information, even as he filed away the observations they'd already offered.

The Insecticon with two stripes was Sharpshot. Hardshell had three stripes. Would this Kickback have one stripe? Was it a seniority thing?

"I'm not your queen," Sunstreaker pointed out.

Not yet at any rate. He hadn't come out here looking for Insecticons. He'd come out here chasing just one. His bug. He didn't intend to stay.

But there was something in the way Hardshell looked at him, in the way they all looked at him, and it piqued Sunstreaker's curiosity. They tempted him.

Hardshell had called him perfect.

What did he have to lose? What had he really left behind? Back in a city of people he didn't recognize. What would it hurt to see their offer? If they ate him, well, maybe he owed them that much. He certainly owed someone.

"Tempt me." Sunstreaker lifted his chin, displaying a false bravado he'd perfected over the years. "Maybe I can be convinced." If history had proven anything, Sunstreaker was pretty easy to tempt.

Just ask Starscream.

"Come." Hardshell held out a massive hand, talons catching the occasional stream of light and gleaming wickedly. "I will show you the gift which could be yours."

Sunstreaker stepped toward the offered hand before he caught himself. He tilted his head. "Gift," he repeated. "It sounds more like a prison."

A low, raspy noise rattled out of Hardshell's chassis. Maybe it was a laugh. "Once you accept this offer, there will be no bars that can hold you, my queen."

"I'm not your queen," Sunstreaker insisted.

Another maybe-laugh bubbled out of Hardshell's intake. It sent chills up Sunstreaker's spinal strut. "We'll see. Come."

Hardshell stared at Sunstreaker. Expectant. Confident. His hand still offered, fingers curled slightly inward as if to keep the sharpness of his talons away. There was a tremble in his hand, however slight.

Sunstreaker added another adjective to the list.

Desperate.

He knew that look all too well.

He didn't take Hardshell's hand, but he nodded his assent. "Lead. I'll follow."

"This time only, my queen, will I be the one to lead." Hardshell swept forward in a shallow bow.

It was hard not to be swayed by the deference in Hardshell's tone. It sounded sincere.

A sharp thrill ran through Sunstreaker's processor.

He used to dream about mech's bowing to him, praising him, singing his designation to the stars. He used to fantasize about being important, recognized, worshiped even. And here Hardshell was, offering it to him.

Temptation cluttered around him, chittering and rustling and peering down with multiple optics. It was almost enough to forget that he was in an Insecticon Hive.

Bob bumped the back of his knees, chirring up at him.

"I know, I know. I'm going," Sunstreaker muttered. He forced his feet into motion, swaying briefly when his vision swam and a stab of pain licked behind his optics.

How hard had he hit his head?

Sharpshot didn't follow. He stayed behind, watching, and Sunstreaker felt the weight of the two-striped Insecticon's gaze on him. He, like Hardshell, carried that same desperate hope.

Hardshell led, and Sunstreaker followed, Bob at his heels. The gathered Insecticons parted to make a path, their focused stares making Sunstreaker's armor prickle and his defensive protocols throw up confused signals. Sunstreaker's fingers itched to hold a blaster, but he'd lost his when he fell, and his secondary was mysteriously gone from his thigh compartment.

He dreaded to think of which Insecticon had pawed him in order to find and dispose of it.

Hardshell headed for one of the off-shoot tunnels, the ceiling low in comparison to Hardshell, but too high for Sunstreaker to touch. The tunnel was wide enough Sunstreaker could transform if he wanted. But the uneven ground and the fact he had no idea where the tunnels led or if there was even escape here, kept him from doing so. His undercarriage had suffered enough damage already.

His head still ached.

It occurred to him that he could be walking into a trap. Blindly following the predator deeper into his den. But Bob trundled happily alongside him, a skip in his steps, his optics bright in the way that meant he wasn't worried at all. Sunstreaker had always trusted the bug's instincts more than his own, recent and sudden flight into the wasteland notwithstanding.

Bob protected him. Always. If Bob wasn't worried, why should he be?

Then again, Bob's definition of 'safe' maybe didn't coincide with Sunstreaker's own, since Bob had brought him here in the first place. Though, Sunstreaker couldn't be a queen if he was dead, so there was that.

One tunnel led to another, this one less oppressive and suffocating, less stuffed with Insecticons. They only clung to the ceiling here, and they were smaller in stature. Smaller even than Bob. They also seemed to be of a different type, less armored, with more limbs and thinner structures on their frames.

Sunstreaker had always assumed Bob was small because he was a runt, and that was why Sunstreaker had found him alone. There wasn't a lot of information about Insecticons, and Perceptor had always agreed with Sunstreaker's conclusions.

But if these Insecticons were smaller, maybe Sunstreaker was wrong. Or they were sparklings? Babies? Too soon to tell.

Maybe he could ask. Maybe Hardshell was chatty.

"You want me to be your queen," Sunstreaker said, and kind of wished he were Prowl at the moment. That aft would know how to interrogate a Pit of a better than Sunstreaker did. He was a blunt force object to Prowl's surgical precision. "Which means you don't have one. Are you the leader then?"

"In a manner of speaking." Hardshell's vocals rumbled back to him. One hand made a vague gesture. "I guide. I am in a unique position. I am important in a way that is second only to our queen."

Well, that wasn't vague at all.

"So you're what? A king? A prince?"

Hardshell paused and turned to look at Sunstreaker, his visor bleak and baleful in the dim of the tunnel. "Neither," he said, mandibles twitching around his mouth. "The queen rules. The queen is primary. The queen has no equal."

*No equal.*

Sunstreaker shivered, the words reverberating in his audials and through his processor. He didn't desire power. That wasn't his dream. But the worship, the adoration, the implied sovereignty...

It was so very tempting.

The tunnel widened into a mouth, which dumped them into a cavernous space, larger than any Sunstreaker had seen yet. The walls were honeycombed with deep depressions, optics and visors glowing from some but not all. The ceiling was webbed with some kind of substance that emitted a pale light. The floor was swept clean around raised projections that contained more of the honeycomb-like openings.

"Where are we?"

"Living quarters," Hardshell said as he took the most central path. "Your warriors, your guardians, your foragers. All reside here. All are one."

Sunstreaker frowned. "One what? One Hive?"

“One Hive. One Mind. One Purpose.” There was weight in Hardshell’s words. It sounded more like a chant. Like Rodimus’ propensity to throw ‘till all are one’ into every speech.

The hulk of Hardshell’s shoulders seemed to blot out all else in front of Sunstreaker. The rise of the lines of barracks dwarfed Sunstreaker as well. He felt small and insignificant, with even Bob no longer the smallest creature around.

They left one cavern of honeycombed holes and entered another, the hollowed out spaces less than half the size of the ones in the other cavern.

“More living spaces?” Sunstreaker asked.

“These are for the scouts, the feeders, the attendants, and the searchers.” Again, Hardshell paused, turning to face Sunstreaker. He gestured to Bob, who had planted his aft and tilted his head in that cute way he often did. “Like your companion.”

Sunstreaker’s orbital ridge drew downward. “Bob’s a runt.”

“He is the right size for his function. He seeks. He searches.” Hardshell lowered his hand, a low purr-rumble rolling out of his chassis. “And he has found.”

“Found what?”

Hardshell rattle-laughed. “You.”

Sunstreaker looked at his pet, his friend, and definitely not a runt. “He was looking for me?”

“Looking for someone like you,” Hardshell corrected as Bob popped back up and trundled toward Sunstreaker, patting his legs with his secondary, smaller hands.

He chirruped and his optics brightened in a grin, as they often did when he was trying to be cute and comfort Sunstreaker. His aft wiggled. He patted Sunstreaker’s knee again.

Sunstreaker crouched and ran a hand over Bob’s head, scratching between the Insecticon’s antennae as he did so. “You’ve always known, haven’t you?” he asked, not that he expected Bob to answer with words. “Is that why you stuck around?”

Bob’s head pushed into his hand and a rolling purr emerged from his chassis. His little hands rested on Sunstreaker’s knees, his ex-vents puffing against Sunstreaker’s frame. His field, as contained as it was, butted against Sunstreaker’s.

“It is not the only reason,” Hardshell said as Bob’s optics dimmed and he pressed hard against Sunstreaker, as if trying to climb into his lap. Which, while Bob was a runt in Sunstreaker’s optics, he was still too big to fit comfortably there. “Even without the crown, he will always be yours.”

Sunstreaker blinked and looked up at Hardshell. “What’s that mean?”

Hardshell’s gaze was almost fond as he looked at Bob. “If you refuse our offer, if you leave us to our fate, the little one will leave with you. He is yours.”

Leave them to their fate? Why did that sound so ominous? And little one? Hardshell seemed to avoid using the name Sunstreaker had given Bob.

He rubbed over Bob's antennae again. "Bob's not his name, is it?"

"It is now."

But it wasn't always. Maybe, if Sunstreaker could talk to Bob later, like Hardshell implied he would be able to, Sunstreaker could ask what Bob's name was before Sunstreaker changed it. He owed Bob that much.

Sunstreaker gave Bob a final pet and stood up again. "All right," he said. "What else do you have to show me?"

Hardshell couldn't smile, not without it coming across as some sort of mandibular horror show, but there was something in his expression that signaled pleasure nonetheless. He gestured to Sunstreaker, hand open but fingers curled inward, talons hidden again. He treated Sunstreaker like a skittish mech, a lost youngling, prey surrounded by predators.

Well.

He wasn't wrong.

"Come," Hardshell said. "There is much to see."

Sunstreaker followed, with less apprehension this time, and he wondered how that had happened. When he'd gone from outright wariness to a mild concern.

They left the living spaces and entered another tunnel, which didn't look any different than all the others. Sunstreaker imagined himself getting lost down here, unable to find his bearings, endlessly roaming one corridor and another, only managing to go deeper, until he was forgotten by the world above.

If there even was a world up there. Sunstreaker had no idea where he was. His GPS was giving him an error message, and he didn't know if it was because the system was in need of an update, or because it honestly had no idea. Or if there was something in the tunnels that interfered with his sensors.

"Why do you need a queen anyway?" Sunstreaker asked, and only once he spoke did he realize how much his vocals echoed. It was quieter here. The noise of the skittering and chattering and buzzing grew more distant. "You seem to be doing all right without one."

"Appearances are deceiving," Hardshell said. He didn't turn to look at Sunstreaker, but the plating around his shoulders hunched. "What did you notice?"

"Huh?"

"As we passed through the living quarters."

Sunstreaker's frown deepened. He thought back. To the empty spaces, the hollowed places, the multiple optics staring back at him, and the places where there should have been frames, but weren't. He thought about the horde of Insecticons crowding the cavern where he'd first awoken. He did the math.

What if all of those Insecticons were the entirety of the Hive?

He looked up at Hardshell, suddenly aware. “You’re dying.”

“Everything dies, and we are not the least of them.” Hardshell tipped his head, the buzz of his energy field so alien to Sunstreaker, as though it had living weight. “The Hive perishes without a queen. We are mistaken. We are hunted. We are dying. Soon, we will cease.”

Hunted.

A pang of guilt rang through Sunstreaker before he could stop it. He remembered how many of the Swarm he’d killed. He knew how ruthlessly every Cybertronian – Autobot and Decepticon alike – slaughtered the Insecticons. They were considered a terrible threat, and an abomination to be exterminated.

“The Swarm is a danger to Cybertron,” Sunstreaker said in a vain attempt to assuage his guilt.

Hardshell’s visor flashed before it dimmed flat. “We are not Swarm,” he said, and turned away from Sunstreaker, walking forward with measured steps. “The Swarm is an abomination,” Hardshell continued, his vocals guttural and angry. “A corruption of what we are. It is the failure of a mad mech who once believed he could manufacture a queen.”

Sunstreaker chewed on his bottom lip. “So... you’re not Swarm?”

“No.”

For the first time, Hardshell’s deference faltered. Where he’d been almost cordial, it vanished to a chilly distance.

Okay then. The Insecticons here had nothing to do with Shockwave’s Swarm. Good to know. And also, apparently, never bring up again.

“Good to know,” Sunstreaker said, and opted to drop the topic until maybe, it was less of a heated one.

They entered another tunnel, leaving the nearly-empty living quarters behind them. This tunnel became narrower and sloped downward. Quiet descended, until Sunstreaker only heard their footsteps crunching over the uneven surface. It was darker here, the glow of biolights and multiple optics left behind.

Sunstreaker’s sensors prickled. His cooling fans kicked on, and only then did Sunstreaker realize his gauges were registering an uptick in the ambient temperature. The further they descended, the more it continued to climb, and with it, the humidity level. The walls fairly glistened. The ground kept sticking to the bottom of his feet.

Bob had no trouble walking, and neither did Hardshell, as they shifted their weight to the more pointed areas of their feet. Sunstreaker, however, had difficulties.

Condensation gathered on Sunstreaker’s armor, collecting in his transformation seams and pooling in his joints. He shifted out of discomfort, his plating flaring to try and encourage airflow over his substructure.

“Primus, what do you have down here?” Sunstreaker demanded as his HUD lit up with temperature warnings. “A smelter’s pit?”

Hardshell chuckled. “Quite the opposite as a matter of fact.”

All right, so cryptic answers were still going to be a thing. Sunstreaker sighed and looked down at Bob, who still seemed to be unconcerned. If anything, the bug looked happy, like he was delighted to finally be around his own kind again.

The air started to feel as thick as sludge, and Sunstreaker fought to pull it through his vents. The slope of the corridor evened out. His feet sank into a dense, spongy layer of something. He wrinkled his nose. Gross. It was probably a good thing he couldn’t see what it was.

There was an opening ahead, though instead of widening like the others, this one narrowed. Something fluttered from the ceiling, like fabric maybe or...

Nope. That was definitely webbing. A scent floated to his nasal sensors then, one he couldn’t quite identify. It was somehow sweet and sour and vaguely organic, and it reminded Sunstreaker of Earth, when he’d gotten lost and stumbled into the gross muck of a swamp. It had taken him hours – long hours spent resorting to the cold spray of a local car-wash – to get all of the gunk and insects out of his gears.

The prevalent silence was all the more obvious by the odd squelching noise of Sunstreaker’s footsteps. He ducked to avoid the overhanging webs, shuddering at the thought of it clinging to his armor, and stepped into another cavern, though this one had a very low ceiling and what appeared to be several wide, but shallow pits in the ground.

The pits were empty, but Sunstreaker had the feeling they weren’t supposed to be. The walls were very slick and a viscous substance dribbled down them, collecting into little pools on the floor. More webbing covered the ceiling, like a gossamer carpet.

Sunstreaker crouched near one of the pits. It was filled with a spongy substance, and webbing rested on top of it in geometric patterns. Nest, he felt, was the best word to describe it.

“This was the breeding ground,” Hardshell said, and though he spoke softly, the emptiness made his words echo. “It’s been so long since we had a queen that the last of the young have since become juveniles.”

Sunstreaker retracted his hand, rubbing his fingers together. They felt oily, and when he sniffed them, he caught a whiff of the organic odor.

“You can’t reproduce without a queen,” he said, and he wasn’t sure if it was a question or a statement. He’d known that already, but he hadn’t known it. Seeing the empty nests, which probably should have been filled with eggs, gave him an odd pang in his spark chamber.

“We cannot,” Hardshell confirmed, an ache in his vocals, his visor dim as he looked over the empty creches.

Sunstreaker was needed, he realized. The nests were empty, for a long time if he had a guess. Their queen was dead. They’d yet to find another. Was it because they’d had no good candidates? Or because their candidates had all declined what needed to be a freely offered surrender?



“Why?” Sunstreaker asked.

Hardshell’s mandibles twitched. “That is the way we were made.”

By who? Or what? Which of the Primes did they trust? Which of the Thirteen could have given life to their bestial forms? Not that Sunstreaker believed in such sparkling tales. About the only deity he offered credence was Primus, and that unworthy was either dead or he didn’t care anymore.

Sunstreaker looked up. There were round, gauzy spheres of something tangled up in the thread-like webs strewn over the ceiling. They looked like cocoons.

“Those are the caretakers,” Hardshell said, probably tracing Sunstreaker’s gaze. “Right now, they are dormant, until there is young to care for. They wait, Sunstreaker, to serve their queen.”

Sunstreaker worked his intake. His mouth felt oddly dry.

Hardshell turned away from him, making hardly any noise despite the silence. “Come. There is much to see.”

Sunstreaker moved to follow. His feet felt like they were weighted down. He moved through sludge, and his thoughts spun around in circles. His fans sputtered. The heat suffocated him. Static danced in his visual feed.

“Sunstreaker?”

He swayed. “I’m fine,” Sunstreaker replied, but it slurred. He tried to repeat himself, his glossa feeling overly large and thick for his mouth. He tried another step and stumbled, catching himself at the last minute.

Dots danced in his visual feed. He sucked in a vent, but his fans creaked and whined.

Hardshell had turned toward him, his visor dim with concern. His mouth opened, but all Sunstreaker could hear was a low-pitched whine.

“I’m fine,” Sunstreaker repeated, and he felt his vocalizer glitch. His vision became a smear of shadows. He took another step.

Or at least he thought he did.

He never felt himself falling, just the darkness as it swallowed him whole.

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## Chapter 3

Sunstreaker onlined slowly, his sensor suites rebooting one by one, registering warmth and softness, safety and comfort. He lay on something plush and inviting, cradling his frame like a gentle cocoon. He heard soft sounds, like the recharging ventilations of a berth partner, and there were gentle strokes along his plating.

He onlined his optics, the dull throbbing in his processor more tolerable than the sharp knifing that had sent him into unconsciousness before. It was dimly lit here, but brighter than the first cavern.

The rustling of multiple limbs skittering across surfaces registered first. The walls and ceiling looked to be in constant motion.

He was on a berth. Or a facsimile of one. Webbing stretched from wall to wall beneath him, and where he lay, concave in the center, coverings had been arranged. Pillows, too.

“Shh, shh, Queen is resting.”

“Shh, shh, quiet, quiet.”

“Shh, shh. Make shiny. For Queen.”

Words trickled in, whispering babble. The strokes across his armor gentled even further.

Sunstreaker shifted, rising up on his elbows, and looked down. Tiny Insecticons scuttled around his frame, the smallest he'd seen and not a one bigger than his own head. Their small grasping hands held little cloths which they were using to dab at his armor.

He was clean, cleaner than he thought possible here in the dark and grit. His armor all but glowed. Their tiny fingers dipped into seams, gently massaging at cables, and he felt the tickle of some kind of oily substance before it, too, was wiped away.

Well.

He could get used to this. It was weird, but then again, he was deep in an Insecticon Hive. Everything was weird. They weren't trying to eat him. They weren't trying to molest him. Technically.

They were kind of cute, actually.

“Shh, shh,” they chattered as they clambered nimbly up and down the webbing, focusing intently on Sunstreaker's frame. “Queen is resting. Queen is shiny. Shh, shh.”

“You're awake.”

Sunstreaker slid back into the comfort of the webbing and turned his head. Hardshell came into view at Sunstreaker's right side, and beside him was Bob, who chittered and wriggled and leapt up to join Sunstreaker.

“Made a new friend, I see,” Sunstreaker murmured as he stroked over the daffy bug's head. Bob purred and nuzzled him, little hands patting Sunstreaker's face. “Where am I?”

He didn't bother to ask what had happened. The heat, the humidity, his recent injuries -- he'd shut down out of sheer self-preservation.

Hardshell dipped his head, mandibles clicking together. "One of many rooms for the Queen's use. A place where we can care for you. Where you can lay your eggs in comfort and ease."

"Eggs?" Sunstreaker grimaced and touched his belly. "Cybertronians don't lay eggs."

"Queens lay eggs," Hardshell said and a single fingertip touched Sunstreaker's abdomen, above his own hand. "You will carry. You will birth. We will grow. We will thrive."

Sunstreaker batted his hand away and sat back up, shifting his legs and making the tiny Insecticons scatter. "And I told you that I can't!"

"But you will. Soon. You will learn." Hardshell wisely withdrew his hand, though there was reluctance in the motion. "You are needed."

Sunstreaker swung his legs over the side, the webbing swaying beneath the shifting of his weight. "Yeah, I get that. Still not seeing what's in it for me."

"Community."

Sharpshot emerged from the shadows, the glow of his biolights outlining his frame. "You will never be alone. Alone again. Again you'll be one."

A sharp tremble of something tore through Sunstreaker's spark. "What?"

"You have lost. Lost a piece. A piece of yourself." Sharpshot came even closer, until he and Hardshell stood in front of Sunstreaker, almost bracketing him in. "You are broken. Broken and hurting." He gestured to Sunstreaker's chassis.

The tremble intensified. Sunstreaker's vents became labored. "You don't know what you're talking about!" he snapped as he shoved himself to his feet, ignoring the way Bob knocked against his back, making urgent noises. He smacked Sharpshot's hand away, and tried to stomp to freedom, but the dizziness struck again.

Sunstreaker swayed and grabbed blindly for the webbed berth to steady himself. His vents roared, and he dragged air through his mouth, off-lining his optics. His gyros spun dizzily, giving him a nauseating lurch in his tanks. He couldn't seem to find his balance.

Was it really just his injuries? Or was there something more sinister going on?

"What did you do to me?" Sunstreaker growled, attempting to direct a glare in their direction, but static fritzed his vision.

Bob made a concerned noise and patted at his arm.

"Repairs given. Energon. Cleaning and polishing. Nothing more," Hardshell said.

Sunstreaker's free hand brushed his forehead. He cycled several ventilations. "Then why am I so dizzy?"

Something moved in his peripheral vision. An energy field tentatively brushed against his own, and there was something warm in it, like comfort and spiced energon.

"You are broken. Broken and lost. Lost and missing," came Sharpshot's voice, and there was something lyrical about the purr, something that seemed to resonate to Sunstreaker's core. "Missing your half."

The dizziness faded into abrupt clarity, like a fog had been lifted.

“That’s a myth,” Sunstreaker mumbled. There was no special bond between brothers, between twins. They were related. They were one. But they were separate. Family didn’t even mean you had to love one another.

Sometimes, you didn’t even like each other.

“What is myth but an unproven truth?” Hardshell asked, and a second field reached out, equally warm, like the gentle embrace of strong arms. “Fact or fiction, you are longing, Sunstreaker. You seek to fill a void.”

His spark chamber ached. He leaned his hip against the berth, curling an arm around Bob who pressed up against him, his little hands patting Sunstreaker’s frame in a clear offer of comfort.

“And you think I can do that here,” Sunstreaker said. It wasn’t a question. Hardshell and Sharpshot both had implied as much.

“I think you can find your answers with us,” Hardshell said and made a broad gesture, to the walls and the ceiling, where multitudes of optics and visors looked down at Sunstreaker. They had been silent, so quiet he hadn’t noticed their presence, but he acknowledged them now.

Far too many to count. All shapes and sizes. Clinging to every surface, their optical feeds fixed on Sunstreaker. Even the tiny cleaner Insecticons huddled on the berth, staring limpid at Sunstreaker, small fingers twisting together.

“We offer. Offer everything. Everything you could want,” Sharpshot added in that same lyrical cadence which seemed to captivate Sunstreaker’s audials like a spell.

*Can you give me back my brother?* Sunstreaker thought bitterly, but he didn’t voice it aloud.

He swallowed over a lump in his intake, barely registering the low tremble that had settled into his frame.

He was considering it. Primus, help him, but he was tempted by what they offered him. Worship. Adoration. A purpose. A meaning. A chance to do some good, to make up for all the slag which had cost him the things that mattered.

A home.

Sunstreaker cycled a ventilation. “W-what if I say no?” A dangerous question, perhaps, but if they’d wanted to kill him, they’d have done so already. Could he refuse?

“A Queen takes. A Queen cannot be taken,” Hardshell said.

“You will be free. Free to leave. Leave us forever,” Sharpshot said, but his mandibles clacked together in a gesture that would have been nervous on the standard Cybertronian. His field trilled against Sunstreaker’s, infecting the offered comfort with something else.

Dread. Sorrow. An aching loneliness Sunstreaker was too familiar with.

“And you’ll find another Queen?” Sunstreaker persisted.

The two large Insecticons looked at one another. It was Hardshell who stood straighter, as though refusing to bend in the face of a great mountain.

“We are dying,” he said, and the chitters of the surrounding Hive abruptly hushed. The silence was more unsettling than their chatter. “Without a Queen, we will cease.”

“Or She will come. Come for us.” Sharpshot seemed to shrink, scuttling as he did, and moved until he hid half-behind Hardshell. “We can’t refuse. Refuse her call.” The warm fuzz of his field vanished, but not before Sunstreaker sensed a glacial spike of unease.

Sunstreaker frowned. “Who?”

Again, the two exchanged glances, and in an eerie synchrony, turned to look at Sunstreaker. “Airachnid,” they said, their vocals overlapping.

Something rippled through the gathered masses. Something that felt simultaneously fearful and loathing, resigned and rebellious. The chittering began anew, only it had a different frequency to it this time.

They did not like Airachnid, Sunstreaker surmised. But, it seemed, they couldn’t resist her either.

He’d heard stories about the Predacon. Her wiles. That she had the ability to bend others to will, if given half the chance.

The Insecticons, with their weird coding and their Hive-like mentality, they’d be ripe for the taking for someone like that. Whether they wanted it or not. They needed a Queen to lead them and so they could reproduce apparently. They couldn’t do it on their own.

What happened to their previous Queen?

“She’s on Cybertron?” Sunstreaker asked with a frown. Because this was news to him, and probably news to every Bot, Con, and NAIL on the planet as well. Airachnid was a Decepticon by default, but the only purpose she ever truly served was her own.

No way would she fall in line behind Starscream. Or Galvatron. Or Soundwave. Or whoever was supposedly leading the purple badge right now. She’d take the Insecticons, build herself an army, and lay waste to whatever was left of Cybertron, if only so she could sit on a throne of corpses, master of her domain.

Hardshell straightened. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. If she ever learns we are without a queen, she will be soon enough.”

Sunstreaker jerked his head in a nod. The terror and malaise in the room was palpable. He could read the fear in Hardshell’s face, in the dim of Sharpshot’s visor.

“Why don’t you have a queen?” Sunstreaker leaned back against the berth, Bob pressed against his spinal strut in an offer of warmth and companionship. “Are you asking me to sign up for something that’s just going to get me killed?”

“Not at all,” Hardshell said and the grief in the room suddenly became suffocating. The chittering turned to a soft, low hum. “We lost our queen in the Titan fight. One of our breeding caverns were crushed in the battle, taking our queen with it.”

It was at least something Sunstreaker didn’t have to blame himself for. The whole incident with the Titans and Shockwave and whatever that nonsense was, it wasn’t Sunstreaker’s fault. He’d only been one of many soldiers, fighting against a tide of Ammonites, struggling to defend Cybertron from invasion.

“We mourned. Mourned then fled. Fled here. Here for solace,” Sharpshot murmured, inching out from behind Hardshell, his head dipped, as though trying to make himself small. His wings fluttered against his back, looking like frail, fragile things.

So this hadn’t always been their home. They’d rebuilt their Hive here. They’d taken the survivors of their colony and fled here. Wherever here was. Not too far from Metroplex, Sunstreaker gathered. He couldn’t imagine he’d been unconscious that long.

Or perhaps it wasn’t a matter of distance. Perhaps it was a matter of depth. That would explain why his GPS wasn’t working.

“We rebuild. We survive,” Hardshell said with a shift of his weight and a gesture to the multitudes around them. “But without a queen, we are nothing.”

Sunstreaker sank down on the webbed berth. It swayed gently beneath him, but held his weight, even when Bob tried to climb into his lap. Sunstreaker allowed him, wrapping his arms around the purring Insecticon.

It felt weird, knowing Bob wasn’t Bob or a runt, to still think of the bug as his pet. But Bob didn’t seem to mind, and it didn’t seem to bother Hardshell or Sharpshot either.

“I’m not an Insecticon,” Sunstreaker said as he scratched behind Bob’s audials and little hands patted at his thighs. “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t be your queen.”

Sharpshot briefly rested a hand on Hardshell’s shoulder. They exchanged a knowing look, and Sunstreaker swore he saw an electric spark pass between them, before Hardshell stepped out from under Sharpshot’s hand. He moved closer to Sunstreaker, and Sunstreaker braced himself.

Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of Hardshell dropping to one knee in front of him, resting an arm over the bent knee. He looked up at Sunstreaker, like a knight addressing his majesty.

“You can be changed,” Hardshell said, his voice oddly soft, as if intended to soothe. “You can be remade. Stronger. Faster. One of us.”

Something crawled up Sunstreaker’s spinal strut. It wasn’t entirely discomfort. “How?” He doubted there was some kind of advanced laboratory here. No way could they perform a frame transfer.

Sharpshot’s fingers tangled together. “Hardshell is not leader. Leader is not Queenmaker. Queenmaker is Hardshell.”

Sunstreaker frowned. It was a convoluted statement, one he had to pick apart until he tilted his head and looked at Hardshell again.

“Queenmaker,” he repeated. No wonder Hardshell was important. “What’s that mean? You rewrite my coding or something?”

“In a sense.” Hardshell remained kneeling, as if he wanted to appear subservient and meek, no kind of threat. “Within my coding is the means to transform another into a proper queen. Through interfacing.”

Sunstreaker’s optics widened. “That’s ridiculous-- I don’t-- Why would--” Each bitten off demand was unfinished, because Sunstreaker couldn’t decide what was more important or absurd about Hardshell’s implication.

Hardshell's gaze remained imploring. "The change is gradual and requires repeated uploads of the coding. As for why the uploads aren't simply transmitted through dataports, well, I challenge you to find a single Insecticon with one."

"You don't have dataports?" Sunstreaker demanded, incredulous. That was absurd. All Cybertronians had dataports. The Camiens had dataports! The Predacons, too. Even the weirdest Cybertronians from the weirdest colonies Sunstreaker met had dataports.

"They are not. Not necessary for our survival." Sharpshot twittered, wings twitching and fluttering against his back. "We are different. Different but unique. Unique and better."

For someone else, that would have come across as arrogance. For the Insecticons, it sounded like stated fact. They were better because they believed they were better. Just like Cybertronians mech-in-nature believed themselves superior to the rest of the universe.

It was arrogance all too familiar to Sunstreaker.

An arrogance not unlike his own.

"So..." He worked his intake. "To become your queen, you'd have to frag me. A lot." He took a long look at Hardshell, much longer than before.

Hardshell was massive. Sunstreaker had taken larger mechs before. It was nothing a little relaxing and preparation couldn't solve, but Sunstreaker had the feeling Hardshell's equipment wasn't Cybertronian standard. Whatever he had was big. Built for pleasure, maybe. Built to serve his queen.

Sunstreaker's internals tightened. His array warmed at his core. He wasn't unopposed, he realized, as the mental image of Hardshell looming over him, filling him to every node and sensor within his valve, sent a thrill of lust through Sunstreaker's circuits.

Hardshell dipped his head in something like a deferential bow. "Yes, my queen. And it would be my honor to serve you in this way."

*Serve.*

*Queen.*

Such intoxicating, seductive words.

Sunstreaker's mouth went dry as he considered it. Leading them. Being one of them. Breeding for them. Never alone. Never abandoned. Never forgotten. Worshiped. Adored.

If he left, what did he really have to go back to? Some small and dingy apartment in a ghetto? An atmosphere of tension and anger waiting to tip back into violence and death? A hole in his spark where Sideswipe used to be, myths be damned. The weight of guilt, blossoming back into a new mass after the peace his journey on the Lost Light had given him.

No friends. No family. Nothing.

He had nothing to lose, and a lot to gain.

Mechs would talk. Mechs always talked. Sunstreaker imagined what they'd say about him if they ever found out.

Crazy. Disgusting. Pervert. Traitor.

These nameless mechs who never cared a thing about Sunstreaker, why did he care what they thought about him.

What would Sideswipe say?

It didn't matter. Because Sideswipe was dead. Sideswipe had found another brother, another friend in Arcee. Which was good, because Sunstreaker sucked as a brother anyway.

Sunstreaker was tired. He was so very tired.

Something lightly touched his knee. Sunstreaker unshuttered optics he hadn't realized he'd closed and looked down at Hardshell, who had rested his taloned hand very lightly on Sunstreaker's knee.

"There is so much more I could show you," Hardshell said, and something in his tone captivated Sunstreaker's attention, narrowing the world down to the two of them.

He distantly heard the chitters of the other Insecticons. Bob and Sharpshot were nearby, but silent. Sunstreaker was aware that they weren't alone. But it felt like they were. As if he were captivated by the gleam of Hardshell's visor, and the three parallel marks on Hardshell's face.

"You've not seen everything. There is much more to the Hive, to us," Hardshell continued, and the weight of his hand on Sunstreaker's knee became all the more tangible. "But there is nothing more that will convince you. And the choice remains, as it always has been, yours."

Hardshell knelt there, staring up at him, and only then did Sunstreaker realize his vents were subtly quickening. In the background, the dizziness lurked, a sense he was falling into some dark abyss. He'd felt that once before, when he'd escaped from the humans and was left with a hate so consuming, the only freedom had been Starscream and an ill-fated plan.

Back then, he'd made the wrong choice. Somehow, walking away felt like he'd be tipping into the dark all over again.

His arms tightened around Bob, who was uncharacteristically still and quiet where he cuddled in Sunstreaker's lap. "If I accept your offer, can I go back?"

Hardshell tilted his head. "Back?" He sounded confused, as did the press of his field. "You may leave, if you wish. Rejecting us--"

"No, I don't mean right now. I don't mean a rejection. I mean... if I become one of you now, can I change my mind later?" Did he have the option to run? Or was this a lifetime commitment deal?

Hardshell's hesitation was obvious. "...No," he admitted. "You will always be our queen. You could leave us, if you so choose, but you will still have that tie. We will always be yours, and perhaps you'll survive the severance. But we will not."

Ouch.

He would hold their lives in his hands. Sunstreaker could barely take care of himself. Bob was lucky he was so damned self-sufficient. Could he manage the burden of an entire Hive? Could he take that risk, knowing how often he'd failed so many people?

But if he left. If he ran away. He'd be leaving them to their fate. To the possibility of Airachnid



subverting them, or maybe a rogue NAIL or Decepticon, forcing their way into the Hive and taking it for themselves. Someone, perhaps, who would only see the Insecticons as a means to reignite war.

Frag, he better not let Prowl know they were here. Prowl would probably calculate ten-thousand ways he could use the Insecticons for his own ends, too.

They weren't safe. With or without Sunstreaker, the Insecticons weren't safe. And he wasn't sure why he cared so much, just that he did. The same feeling he'd experienced when he'd seen Bob back then rose up in his spark all over again. A clenching, suffocating sensation that he couldn't leave the little runt to die.

Well, he couldn't leave the Hive to die either.

Sunstreaker worked his intake. "If... if I agree. What does that mean? What happens next?"

Hardshell's hand slid away from Sunstreaker's knee and he rose to his full height, though this time he didn't loom. "I would make you into a proper queen." He offered his hand, for the third time, to Sunstreaker. "I will support you every step of the way. You will never be alone, Sunstreaker, for I will remain beside you."

He reacted.

He didn't much think. He stopped running things over and over in his head, not while those words echoed inside of him, reverberating through the emptiness in his spark. He found himself taking Hardshell's hand, rising to his feet, Bob scuttling off his lap and issuing a trill of happiness.

"All right," Sunstreaker said, the words squeezing out past a lump of static in his vocalizer and the arrhythmic pump of his vents. "I'll do it."

*Never alone. No longer alone. Beside you. Staying. Never leaving.*

Hardshell's fingers curled around his, and the way his hand almost disappeared in Hardshell's sent a sharp shiver of heat down Sunstreaker's spinal strut. "You are certain?"

"Don't." Sunstreaker cycled a ventilation, tried to get his system back in focus, but the world kept spinning, spinning, and it was all good. "Don't ask that. Because I'll second-guess myself. Like I second-guess everything. I need this to be the right choice."

The pad of Hardshell's thumb rubbed over the back of Sunstreaker's hand. Sunstreaker followed the motion with his optics, oddly transfixed by it. He was surprised by the gentleness, though he wasn't sure why. It captivated his focus, and he missed Hardshell's next move, recognizing the soft touch of a warm hand to the side of his face too late.

He tilted his head into it, however, because Hardshell's field pulsed affection and reassurance, even as his thumb rested on Sunstreaker's cheek.

"A test then," Hardshell murmured, his voice sliding like silk over Sunstreaker's exterior sensors. "To see if you can withstand my touch."

Sunstreaker thought that was fairly obvious, given the heat heading southward and the quickening of his spark at Hardshell's hands alone. But the Queenmaker intended something different as he leaned down, his ex-vents teasing Sunstreaker's facial vents. His denta were sharp and gleaming, dangerous by all accounts, but his thin lips brushed over Sunstreaker's. He smelled of dark, earthy things. Not something Sunstreaker was used to. Not like the average Cybertronian.

The scent still gave him a thrill. He breathed out through his lips, felt a shiver rush down his spinal strut, and then the kiss firmed, the wet swipe of an Insecticon glossa dampening Sunstreaker's lips before it eased inside his mouth, sweet and moist. Sunstreaker moaned. His knees wobbled, and his free hand waved wildly before he grabbed hold of something on Hardshell and held tight.

The kiss deepened, until it felt as though Hardshell was claiming him. It sent a hot flush through Sunstreaker's frame, which intensified with every delicate scrape of Hardshell's denta, until Sunstreaker tilted against him, their frames coming into contact. Sunstreaker moaned into the kiss, optics shuddering, processor spinning.

Hardshell was warm, hot even, his armor firm and strong against Sunstreaker's own. His engine rumbled, vibrating both of their frames, and his hands were wonderfully gentle. Adoring. Treating Sunstreaker like something to be treasured. His glossa explored Sunstreaker's mouth as though memorizing his taste.

Sunstreaker didn't want this to end. He wanted to see where else it could go. He wanted to see how Hardshell could apply this to the coding upload.

Hardshell pulled back, his lips slow and lingering, his denta the carefulest of scrapes. He nuzzled Sunstreaker's face, and a sound not unlike a purr rumbled in his intake.

Sunstreaker's head spun. "I think..." His glossa swept over his lips, his fans whirring madly. "You passed the test."

Hardshell chuckled, dark and grating and far less ominous than it used to be. "Very well." He stroked the back of his fingers around Sunstreaker's face before he stepped back and slipped into a shallow bow. "Welcome, my queen, to your Hive."

Heat flooded Sunstreaker's frame. His spark strobed a faster beat.

Bob's head nudged under his dangling hand as he chirred up at Sunstreaker. Above, the multitudes of Insecticons chittered and chattered, thousands of tiny feet scraping at the ceilings and tinier wings rustling as they shifted. There was a tingle in the air, like that of relief and anticipation and joy.

It felt like the right decision.

Sunstreaker tilted his head. "I'm honored to be chosen," he replied. It seemed like something he should say. "But... uh... What happens next?"

What now? As the noise grew around him, and it seemed to get brighter, thousands of biolights glowing yellow and purple and green.

Hardshell straightened, lifting a single hand, and silence descended, though the sense of constant movement did not. "Now, you will be remade, though it is a process. One that will take many months." The hand lowered and was offered to Sunstreaker, just as before. "If you are willing, we are ready to begin."

"Now?" Uncertainty sent a chill through his exterior lines. Sunstreaker looked pointedly around him. "Do we have to have an audience?" Not that Sunstreaker was opposed to a little show and tell, but this was a bit more show than he wanted.

If Hardshell's kiss alone made him melt, what would the rest do to him? Sunstreaker absolutely didn't want to turn to mush in front of an audience or become some sort of uninhibited creature with no shame. He didn't want everyone to see him fall apart.

Hardshell chuckled. “No, my queen. This is only one of many chambers for the queen’s comfort. There are others, more private ones. If you prefer.”

“I prefer,” Sunstreaker said without hesitation.

“Very well.” Hardshell directed the next over his shoulder. “Sharpshot, see that the queen’s chamber is ready immediately. I will escort him there.”

Sharpshot dipped into the lowest bow Sunstreaker had seen out of him yet. “At once, Hardshell.” As he straightened, his optics found Sunstreaker, warm and liquid with a startling affection. “You are welcome. Welcome home.”

Home.

Sunstreaker couldn’t deny the way the word caused a liquid warmth to pass through him. Sharpshot turned and departed at a fast clip. Hardshell still offered his hand, unwavering, patient.

Bob butted against Sunstreaker’s lower back. Oh. Bob.

Sunstreaker turned toward the bug, who waggled his aft and looked up at Sunstreaker with a tilted head. “Sorry, bug.” He stroked Bob behind the audials to take the sting out of the rejection. “You’ve interrupted one too many fun times. We’ll have to find somewhere else for you to be.”

“We’ll take care of him,” Hardshell said. “He is our queen’s most special one. He will be treated well. After all, he did find our queen.”

Sunstreaker chuckled and scratched behind Bob’s antenna, making the little Insecticon chirp and waggle more eagerly. “Such a good boy, you are.”

Bob’s wiggling increased in earnest. Sunstreaker grinned at him, though he remained hyper-aware of Hardshell patiently waiting behind him.

“I’m not going to change my mind,” Sunstreaker said, some of his tension easing away. Petting Bob had always soothed him, and now was no exception. “I do want to do this. But for peace of mind, when’s the last time I can say no?”

Hardshell’s field spiked with anxiety. “You may always refuse.”

“No, I mean...” Sunstreaker sighed and turned back toward Hardshell, swallowing over a lump in his intake. “At what point can I change my mind, and it won’t hurt the hive?”

Hardshell tilted his head. “The connection begins to form after the first upload. It won’t... hurt us to refuse, but with each subsequent upload, the connection gets stronger.”

So the chance to back out was now. Or at least, the chance to leave without guilt swallowing him whole.

“Good thing I’m not changing my mind then,” Sunstreaker said and he smiled, or at least he tried to. It felt more like a grimace. He hadn’t smiled in a while. He wasn’t sure what it felt like anymore.

Hardshell still offered a hand. Sunstreaker slid his into it, and shivered as Hardshell’s fingers closed around his.

“I’m ready,” Sunstreaker said.

Hardshell leaned in close, nuzzling the side of Sunstreaker's face. "And I am at your service."

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## Chapter 4

Hardshell took Sunstreaker's hand and led him to another room, this one indeed smaller and far more intimate than the other. A collective of Insecticons had lined the corridors as Hardshell led him, twittering and cheeping their delight.

Bob trundled along in their wake, and plopped himself down outside the door as if appointing himself Sunstreaker's guardian. He'd expected to fight Bob for the right to privacy. But he hadn't had to use a firm word.

The new room was indeed smaller. Slightly larger than a hab-suite on the Lost Light, but it felt more like a home. The walls were wrapped in gauzy web and phosphorescence bathed everything in a pale green glow. The bed was shaped like a traditional berth, large enough to fit three Insecticons, and the padding looked heavy and decadent.

It felt organic, in ways truly Cybertronian tech did not, but it only echoed of Earth. Sunstreaker expected to feel uneasy. Hardshell's field pressed against his, warm and pliant and reassuring. All Sunstreaker felt was a liquid heat building in his groin, and the anticipation stirring in his lines.

He was actually going to do this.

"In the future, you may wish to share your berth. Or recharge with your colony. Perhaps even rest with your drones or your cadre," Hardshell said as the door closed behind them, swinging into place. "But you will always have this room for privacy. If you wish to be alone or don't want to be bothered, you need only think it."

Sunstreaker ran a hand over the berth cover, which felt like no fabric he'd ever touched before. It was smooth and silken, more organic than metallic. "Think it?" he repeated absently, until the meaning of the phrase sank in. "Wait? I'll be telepathic?"

Hardshell stepped up behind him, which would have usually felt like a loom, were it not for the light pressure of his hands on Sunstreaker's shoulders. The heat of him, radiating against Sunstreaker's back and aft like a promise.

"Among so many other things," Hardshell purred, the palms of his hands skating down Sunstreaker's arms and back up again. "You will be connected to us, one mind, one Hive. You will be stronger. Faster. You will be our life. Our light. Our purpose. Our queen."

There was something in the way Hardshell rumbled the title which made Sunstreaker's knees wobble. Which made his ventilations catch and his spike throb and his valve cycle hungrily.

Sunstreaker licked his lips, his optics half-shuttering. "That's a lot of responsibility for one person to bear."

"You won't do so alone." Hardshell's ex-vents teased the back of Sunstreaker head. He nuzzled Sunstreaker from behind, the curl of his field as much of a caress as his hands. "I will be with you, my queen. Always."

The inherent promise in the word sent need boiling through Sunstreaker's lines. He shivered, sinking back against Hardshell, his hands slow-curling into fists.

“Good to know,” he said, and was embarrassed by how hushed his voice had become. Even more so when Hardshell’s hand abandoned Sunstreaker’s arm to slide slowly down the front of Sunstreaker’s frame until the heel of it rested against Sunstreaker’s panel.

A moan eked out of Sunstreaker’s intake. His head tipped back against Hardshell’s chest as those taloned fingers gently scraped over his panel.

“You’ve agreed to this,” Hardshell murmured as the pressure became firmer, steady strokes which ratcheted up the slow build of arousal. “But you are not beholden. Tell me to stop, I will. Refuse at any moment, and I will obey.”

Sunstreaker groaned. He wrapped his right hand around Hardshell’s wrist, keeping that slow stroking hand in place. The other curled around Hardshell’s neck, just beneath the jut of a protective plate.

He considered a dozen responses, but his head spun and the need yawed inside of him, and all he could think was a single word, and so he gave it voice. “More.”

“Anything you wish, my queen.” Hardshell’s other hand slid up Sunstreaker’s abdomen, splaying talon-tipped fingers over his windshield. “I would lay you on this berth and introduce myself, if it’s so allowed.”

Sunstreaker moaned. “It’s allowed. Do it.”

Lust unspooled inside of him. His spike throbbed, reminding him how long it’d been since he’d had only his own hands. How it had been even longer since someone had touched him like this. Gentle and appreciative, like a lover rather than a hard, fast ‘face in a back storage closet.

Hardshell lifted Sunstreaker as though he weighed nothing. His back and aft sank into the softness of the berth, the silky fabric gliding against his armor as though it were liquid mercury, teasing his dermal net. Hardshell followed him, hands and mouth tracing a hot, sensual path upward.

Sunstreaker fisted the blankets, head tipped back, as he felt a kiss on his knees, and the exploratory glide of palms on the outside of his legs. He parted his thighs for the heavy weight that settled between them, but Hardshell didn’t seem to be in any rush. If this was seduction, Sunstreaker had no objections.

“You are beautiful,” Hardshell murmured as his lips and denta explored the intricate workings of Sunstreaker’s left knee. “You will be an even lovelier queen.” Thin talons slipped into the seams of Sunstreaker’s other leg, teasing the cables beneath.

Heat flushed Sunstreaker’s face. “I’m going to look different, aren’t I?” he asked, desperate to distract himself from the restless hunger Hardshell’s careful explorations were causing inside of him.

“Yes. You will be larger. More decorated. Stunning.” Hardshell’s mouth trekked upward, nosing into the seam of Sunstreaker’s hip and thigh. “All shall love you.”

Sunstreaker moaned again, louder. Maybe it said something about him, that he was so aroused by the prospect of being so adored. Or maybe it was the delicate way Hardshell kissed and nipped him, the way his glossa slithered into Sunstreaker’s seams, caressing the cables beneath.

“Yes,” Sunstreaker moaned, his hips canting up toward Hardshell in subtle request for more. Spike and valve both throbbed behind his panels, and his fingers twisted harder in the sheets.

Hardshell loomed over him, all danger and spikes, his visor a swath of crimson in the intimate lighting of the room. He moved further between Sunstreaker’s thighs, splaying them wide, his hands gentle as they cradled Sunstreaker’s hips. He leaned forward, lips nibbling at the join of Sunstreaker’s windshield and torso.

“You will be ours,” Hardshell murmured as his mouth moved further up, denta leaving little nips that made Sunstreaker writhe. “We shall be yours. In spark and mind and frame.”

Sunstreaker arched up toward the Insecticon, shivering as hot ex-vents against the seam of his chestplate seemed but a tease. His spark whirled faster. His processor swam with need.

“Will you take my spark?” Sunstreaker asked, and if his spark didn’t throb harder at the sheer thought of it, Sunstreaker certainly thought it had. He wanted it, in that moment, the press of Hardshell above him, the clash and sizzle of their sparks as they combined, the feeling of being connected to another again...

Hardshell chuckled against his chest, the vibrations rattling through Sunstreaker. “If you wish,” he said as his mouth found Sunstreaker’s, denta nipping gently on his bottom lip. “Anything you ask of me, my queen, you shall have it.”

Sunstreaker’s thighs scrubbed along the outside of Hardshell’s legs as he shifted restlessly, arousal building inside of him. He moaned into the gentle press of Hardshell’s lips and shivered with every bite of sharp denta. Hardshell was large and hot above him, half-blotting out the dim lights illuminating the room.

“Then do it,” Sunstreaker breathed, a demand though his tone didn’t support it. “Make me your queen.”

A deep rumble rose in Hardshell’s intake. “With pleasure.” He nosed into Sunstreaker’s throat, tipped his head back, and bit at his intake cables, enough pressure to register but not cause harm.

Sunstreaker groaned and clutched at Hardshell, feeling the pulse of his spark in the cable clenched between Hardshell’s denta. “Stop teasing me.”

“It is not a tease.” Hardshell’s mouth moved back down, leaving tingly licks in his wake, each swipe of his glossa causing a trail of buzzing heat to linger.

Sunstreaker writhed. His panels snapped aside, and any other time, he might have felt ashamed of his neediness. But right now, all he felt was hunger. Especially when the tip of his spike brushed against Hardshell’s armor, leaving a streak of transfluid behind. It took all he had not to reach down and stroke himself.

“Then give me more!” It was absolutely not a whine, if anyone asked.

Hardshell chuckled, such a deep growl that it seemed to vibrate around Sunstreaker’s spark chamber. It resonated against his armor, and he felt both delicate and cherished as Hardshell cradled his hips and stared at his array with something akin to fondness.

“You have a lovely array,” Hardshell said, one palm sliding inward, fingers bracketing the base of Sunstreaker’s spike, thumb slipping down to brush Sunstreaker’s anterior node.

Electric pleasure shot through Sunstreaker's groin as Hardshell continued, "I am sure it will taste as sweet as it looks."

He fisted the blanket and panted, hips tilting toward Hardshell's fingers. "Please," Sunstreaker begged.

"You need never beg, my queen." Hardshell hummed as he cradled Sunstreaker's hips in one hand and lifted him up, mouth falling hot and wet over Sunstreaker's valve.

Sunstreaker keened, his thighs trembling, head tossing back. Lubricant joined the slick of Hardshell's mouth as a large glossa licked over him, tasting his rim first, exploring each node one by one.

His hips rocked onto Hardshell’s mouth, and Hardshell allowed it, letting Sunstreaker dictate the pace and the depth. He licked deep, glossa pushing further than Sunstreaker had ever experienced, the tip of it prodding his inner nodes.

Sunstreaker shook, pleasure lighting him up from the inside out. His spark spun and flared, trembling with ecstasy. He moaned, long and loud, and didn’t care how audible he was. There was no one to hear him and comment.

Hardshell licked and slurped, nibbling at him oh so gently, until Sunstreaker was sopping wet, lubricant freely dribbling out of his valve. He gave a parting kiss to Sunstreaker’s node, and overload hovered in the wings, threatening to spill over him.

“I’m ready,” Sunstreaker said, clutching fistfuls of the silken covers, his hips tilted up and accommodating.

“You are sure?” Hardshell asked as he pressed a kiss to Sunstreaker’s inner thigh, his warm ex-vents washing over Sunstreaker’s exposed array.

Sunstreaker would have grabbed and tugged, if he could reach. “Do it,” he demanded.

“Yes, my queen.” Light flashed in Hardshell’s visor.

He sat back on his knees, and the sound of a panel spiraling open spilled into the quiet. Sunstreaker rose up on his elbows to get a good look at his spike.

It was, admittedly, like nothing he’d ever seen. Much thicker at the base, it tapered to a point at the tip. It was ridged, with thicker bands toward the bottom, and thinner bands toward the tip. Small, inset nodes glowed like biolights. Something jutted away from the base, and it took several long moments for Sunstreaker to realize what it was for.

He squirmed, heat flushing through his system. That little jut would rub right along his anterior node whenever Hardshell was inside him.

Primus.

Hardshell’s hands smoothed up Sunstreaker’s thighs, large as they cradled Sunstreaker’s hips and



gently eased him into place. The tip of his spike nudged Sunstreaker's valve, brushing over the swollen pleats, and Sunstreaker shivered.

"May I?" Hardshell asked, and for the first time this evening, he sounded labored, his field hot and sweeping with need.

"Yes," Sunstreaker moaned, and if it was possible to cant his hips toward Hardshell, Sunstreaker did. He wanted it, wanted to feel that spike sliding inside of him.

"As you wish, my queen." Hardshell rolled his hips, less of a thrust and more of a long, lingering slide as he sank into Sunstreaker inch by precious inch.

Nodes lit up like fireworks. Sunstreaker's backstrut arched as ecstasy licked through his array, through his valve, and overload washed over him. He gasped, optics rolling back, calipers rippling and flexing, charge licking over his frame in a flash fire.

He dimly heard Hardshell purring words, encouragement and praise maybe, but it was lost to the static of overload. His nodes sang as Hardshell sank deeper and deeper, until he was notched against Sunstreaker's ceiling node, and that protrusion landed firmly over Sunstreaker's swollen anterior node.

Heat and pleasure swirled together in Sunstreaker's groin. He moaned, fisting the covers, and went limp in Hardshell's grasp, letting the Insecticon take the lead. He trusted Hardshell, and that trust was returned as Hardshell moved within him, slowly, carefully.

He built another crescendo, murmuring more praise and compliments. One hand cradled Sunstreaker's aft, the other stroked over his frame, tracing his seams. It felt like worship, and Sunstreaker soaked it up.

Hardshell was careful with him, so careful. And his spike seemed to grow, swelling and thickening inside of Sunstreaker. Those tiny biolights he'd noticed grew, becoming tangible nodes that rubbed along his lining and had his smaller nodes singing.

He overloaded again, or maybe it was just one continuous release of pleasure, with occasional bursts of something sharper, more present. His valve rippled and clenched, spilling waves of lubricant, and his nodes sang from the friction.

"You are beautiful, my queen," Hardshell murmured, curved over Sunstreaker now, one hand braced by Sunstreaker's head, the other cradling him. He loomed over Sunstreaker, not in threat, but a large, protective presence. "You will lead us to greatness. I am certain of it."

The words washed through Sunstreaker's audials, took residence in his spark, sent flashes of heat blooming through his sensory net. He tightened his thighs around Hardshell's waist, the Insecticon's array flush with his, the base of it seeming to swell. The thickness of it rubbed over and over Sunstreaker's rim, tugging at it, dragging sensation over the tiny nodes set into his rim.

Hardshell's trembling became more evident, more earnest. His thrusts increased in urgency, pushing Sunstreaker into the berth. His visor gleamed, his field washing over Sunstreaker with heat and prickles of something Sunstreaker guessed was desire.

"My queen, I am near completion," Hardshell rumbled, and Sunstreaker could hear the strain in his voice, felt the tension in Hardshell's frame as he restrained himself. "May I...?"

Sunstreaker rocked down on Hardshell's spike, taking him to the base and holding himself there, completely enveloping him. "Yes," he breathed, hooking his fingers in Hardshell's chestplate, in an armor seam. Beneath his fingertips, Hardshell's spark seemed to vibrate his armor.

Hardshell rumbled again.

He curved forward, his mouth brushing over Sunstreaker's forehead. "I apologize," he murmured as he held himself still, spike throbbing and grinding over Sunstreaker's ceiling node. "This first time may sting, but I promise, it is only for a moment."

Sunstreaker honestly couldn't imagine anything hurting right now. His entire frame seemed to vibrate with ecstasy, and nothing hurt. There was only pleasure, waves and waves of it.

"Do it," Sunstreaker whispered.

"Yes, my queen." Hardshell's lips pressed against his forehead in a kiss before he thrust again, a bit harsher, deeper than before, and the bulge at the base of his spike slipped in and caught, remaining firmly within Sunstreaker's valve.

He shivered, arching up against Hardshell, his nodes flashing charge one after another, hanging him on the precipice of overload.

Hardshell's forehead pressed to his, and his visor dimmed a little, as though he were concentrating. The length of his spike swelled in girth, stretching the limits of Sunstreaker's valve. He moaned as what felt like thorns jutted into the walls of his valve – not sharp, but prominent – and surges of charge spilled from them like little bolts of electricity.

Sunstreaker jerked, twisting and writhing, as ecstasy shot through his frame. He didn't know if he were overloading or not, it was far too present to tell the difference. He gasped, struggling to ventilate, heat swallowing him whole. Hardshell kept growing within him, thicker and wider, stretching him wide, until they were locked together.

Sunstreaker ached. It was a good ache. His calipers trembled, stretched to their widest point. His nodes twitched and sang, buzzing in the onslaught of charge. He shook, on the cusp of something he couldn't identify, his optics squeezed shut, his lips parted to suck in desperate gulps of air.

Hardshell's hand left his hip, sweeping inward. Sunstreaker trembled, thighs clamped tight around Hardshell's waist. The soft brush of Hardshell's fingers seemed to draw electric heat toward the center of him.

It only took a single touch of Hardshell's finger to his node.

Sunstreaker shattered. Again and again. Wave after wave of ecstasy that immediately precipitated the hot bloom of release inside of him. His spike spurted, his valve cinched tight around the massive spike, and his senses crackled with static.

He distantly heard armor creak. His field exploded in the room. Hardshell moaned, grip returning to Sunstreaker's hip. The Insecticon's hot ex-vents washed over Sunstreaker's frame as he writhed, trapped in an endless cycle of overload, until the last left him limp, collapsing into the embrace of the berth.

Hardshell was still within him, a firm, unmoving presence.

Sunstreaker shivered, exhausted. He didn't even have the energy to unshutter his optics. He could only twitch as charge zipped up and down through his valve nodes.

"Shhh." Hardshell stroked the back of his hand over Sunstreaker's cheek. "Rest now, my queen. I will guard your sleep. You are safe with me." His lips pressed soft on Sunstreaker's forehead. "You will always be safe with me."

Sunstreaker ex-vented, soft and satisfied. He languor pull of recharge pulled him over, and he tipped into it gladly.

~

Sunstreaker came to consciousness slowly, luxuriously, waking from one of the deepest, most restful recharges he had ever undertaken. He was swaddled in warmth and comfort, and nothing hurt. It was an odd enough sensation that for a moment, he wondered if he, too, had died, and this was the Afterspark.

He unshuttered his optics and stared up at a dim, rocky ceiling, gauzy drapes of a silken web fluttering around him. A smell floated to his nasal sensors, a dank, musty odor that wasn't so much unpleasant as it was organic in nature.

The bed rustled beside him. The surface dipped and then a wriggly weight toppled against his right side.

Sunstreaker didn't have to look to know who it was. "Hey, bug," he murmured, vocals dry and scratchy. He lifted a hand, rubbing behind Bob's audials. "Is it time to get up?"

"As queen, you need only rise when you wish."

Sunstreaker went still. He didn't recognize the voice. Nor did he recognize the field accompanying it, tentatively touching his with cool reserve.

He turned his head. There was a large Insecticon standing beside the bed, perhaps a few inches shorter than Hardshell, with a single scar across the entirety of his face. He had both visor and facemask concealing his features, with a pair of stunted antennae and bladed protrusions arching upward from behind his shoulders.

"Who are you?" Sunstreaker demanded. He tried to rise, but a hand planted on his chestplate, keeping him in place.

When Bob didn't growl and snap at the Insecticon, Sunstreaker decided that meant the stranger was safe. For a certain definition of the word.

"Rest, my queen," the Insecticon said, and when Sunstreaker didn't move again, he lifted his hand, retracting it quickly. "I am Kickback. I am the third member of your cadre."

Sunstreaker blinked. "Cadre?"

“Hardshell will explain.” Kickback’s hands were longer, thinner, his fingers more nimble and quick.

Sunstreaker was a bit jealous. Kickback had an artist’s hands.

“Where’s Hardshell?” Sunstreaker asked, glancing around the room he’d been told would be his main chamber.

It was lit by a soft, phosphorescent glow. The webbing clung to the ceilings, giving it a dream-like feel. The warmth lingered, but it wasn’t as sticky hot as it had felt last night.

Last night.

Sunstreaker looked down at himself, absently petting Bob as he surveyed his own frame. He didn’t look any different. He didn’t feel any different either. His valve felt fine, not the least bit sore.

He hadn’t changed at all.

“I’m right here, my queen.”

Sunstreaker rose up on his elbows, without being stopped by Kickback this time, as Hardshell appeared in the open doorway.

“I’d hoped to be back before you woke,” he said. He passed by Kickback, patting the other Insecticon on the shoulder, before he continued to Sunstreaker’s bedside. “I apologize for leaving your side.”

Sunstreaker tilted his head. “It’s fine.” His gaze slanted to Kickback, but he seemed otherwise occupied arranging some items in a nearby carrying case.

Hardshell sat on the edge of the bed next to Sunstreaker’s hip, twisting to rest one large hand on Sunstreaker’s nearest thigh. “It is not, but you’ll understand that in time.” His visor glowed warmly. “How do you feel?”

Bob bound over Sunstreaker’s lap and chirred, prompting something like a smile from Hardshell, who patted him on the head in greeting.

“Fine.” Sunstreaker glanced at Kickback again. No longer arranging items, he seemed to be packing them away now.

“No pain?” Hardshell asked.

Sunstreaker shook his head. Kickback’s demeanor unnerved him. It was distinctly different from the way the other Insecticon’s behaved in his presence. There was a deference to him, but a distance as well.

“The queen has a strong constitution for a wheeled one,” Kickback commented as he snagged a damp cloth and wiped his slender fingers clean. “The searcher chose well.”

“You mean Bob?” Sunstreaker asked.

“That is what you call him, yes.” Kickback’s tone was dismissive, annoyed even. He snapped his case closed and tucked it under his arm. “Hardshell, if you have this in hand, I will return to revitalizing the nesting grounds.”

Hardshell nodded, head dipping, almost deferential but not quite. “I do. Thank you, Kickback.” His tone was warm, dissonant to the chilly disdain of Kickback’s.

Sunstreaker watched the other Insecticon go without a backward glance. He frowned, not with disapproval, but with confusion.

“He doesn’t want me to be queen,” Sunstreaker guessed.

Hardshell patted Sunstreaker’s thigh, the warmth of his field still alien, but warm and comforting. Like the embrace of an oil bath. “It is not you. Kickback had a tempestuous relationship with your predecessor.”

“He doesn’t like authority?” Sunstreaker could relate to that. Authority had never done him any favors, not even when he had it for himself.

“It is complicated.” Hardshell rose and offered a hand to Sunstreaker, as if to help him off the berth. “He will learn to love you in time.”

Sunstreaker paused halfway to putting his hand in Hardshell’s. Unease started to curl in his spark at Hardshell’s words. “You sound like he doesn’t have a choice about it.”

Hardshell’s fingers curled inward. He sat back on his heels, and an odd look crossed his face. His field flickered, but Sunstreaker couldn’t read it. He didn’t know if it was because the odd resonance of an Insecticon’s field or if because Hardshell was withdrawing from him.

Sunstreaker stood on his own as Bob leapt off the berth to rest beside him, leaning against his right leg. Sunstreaker absently dropped a hand to his pet’s head as the silence grew into an uncomfortable thickness.

“Well?” Sunstreaker prompted, putting a touch of command in his voice. “Does he?”

Hardshell’s weight shifted. The light of his visor changed in hue. “The bond is complicated,” he said, at length.

Complicated was another way of sidestepping the answer Sunstreaker didn’t want to hear.

The uneasiness grew into a coil of nausea, deep in his tanks. He dropped his gaze, afraid of the answer, as he asked, “Can you even say no to me?”

“... It is not done,” Hardshell said, and there was a recoil to his posture, a flinch in his frame language that suggested even answering Sunstreaker in such a manner was forbidden in some way.

He felt physically ill.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Sunstreaker said, and it was barely louder than a whisper. He thought about Hunter. Machina. He thought about being a head, an unwilling pawn, having all of his agency, his freedom, taken from him.

Hardshell shook his head slowly. "My duty is to serve the queen. By obeying, I serve the queen."

Sunstreaker swallowed down the rising purge. "No."

"I don't understand." Hardshell cocked his head, field one of genuine confusion, for all that Sunstreaker could sense of it.

"No. I've been there. I won't have it." Sunstreaker's hands folded into fists at his side. Bob whined, perhaps sensing the distress in his field, and butted against Sunstreaker's leg. "I won't have slaves. I can't. I won't do it." He shook his head, a tremble rising in his armor.

He thought of the armies of empty mechs they made him control. He thought of a tiny organic screaming inside his head. He thought of agony that wasn't his, and a disassembled frame, his wires and cables lying around him as he was mocked by beings he could have stepped on, if they hadn't been so clever.

Hardshell's vents emerged in a sharp puff. "It's in our coding," he said. "It's what we know."

"Then I'm going to fragging change it!" Sunstreaker snapped, voice rising, and damn it, but Hardshell flinched back from him, antennae drooping, armor clamping.

The massive Insecticon, twice his height, easily triple his mass, flinched back. Afraid. Cowed.

No.

Sunstreaker wouldn't have it.

A thought occurred to him, rising up unbidden, and he tasted the sour purge at the back of his intake.

"Wait," Sunstreaker said, his vocals raspy, a chill wracking his frame. He looked up at Hardshell. "Did you even want me as you queen? Did you even want... me? Was it only duty?"

Had he fragging raped Hardshell? Had he taken the Insecticon to berth without realizing Hardshell had no choice? Had he taken a position they only offered in desperation? Was he the villain here?

Sunstreaker's vents came in sharper gasps. His vision tunneled; he couldn't seem to focus on anything but the heat and ice, rising alternatively in his frame.

Arms wrapped around him, dragging him in tight, a warm embrace suddenly so familiar to him, for all that it had been alien less than a day ago. Hardshell's field wrapped around him as well, and there was comfort in it.

Sunstreaker struggled. "Don't comfort me," he said, voice thick with static, his armor clattering. "You don't even have a choice about it!"

"It is complicated," Hardshell said, voice low and guttural. Resigned, if Sunstreaker to guess.

"No, it's not!" Sunstreaker jerked and shoved, pulling himself out of Hardshell's embrace, taking a hard step back, his legs bumping the berth, Bob cowering at his feet. He stared up at Hardshell, his optics hard. "I need to know. Tell me right now. Give me an honest answer, because I know you have to. Do you want me as your queen?"

Only for this, would he demand. Only for this would he assert his authority. He had to know. He needed the truth.

Silence.

There was a long, heavy pause. Long enough that Sunstreaker almost pelted out to find the nearest smelting pit and toss himself into it. He'd loathed the kind to take the unwilling his entire life, and now he'd become one of them.

Hardshell lowered himself to one knee in a motion so gradual, his cables and hydraulics creaked. He reached up, took Sunstreaker's hand with one of his own, his thumb sweeping over Sunstreaker's knuckles. He looked up at Sunstreaker, expression solemn.

"Until you asked me that question, I wasn't certain." He bent his head, brushed his mouth over Sunstreaker's knuckles. "Now I am."

Sunstreaker swallowed, his hand trembling in Hardshell's. "You swear?" He sounded like a sparkling, he knew. But he had to be sure.

Hardshell looked up, his visor burning with sincerity, and Sunstreaker couldn't explain it, but somehow he knew Hardshell told the truth. "With every bolt in my frame, my queen. Kickback was right in one thing only. Our searcher chose well. You are the queen we've been waiting for."

Sunstreaker sagged, like someone had cut his strings. Relief tore through his body, chasing out the taut lines of tension.

He wasn't the Machination. He hadn't become the monster.

Hardshell caught him when his knees buckled. His massive hands swept over Sunstreaker's frame. He made a purring hum somewhere in his chassis, and the sound resonated with Sunstreaker's spark, calming him.

He breathed easy for the first time in minutes.

"You are not your predecessor. You will be more," Hardshell said, and it sounded like an intonation, a vow. "You will be a queen we love, not just a queen to serve. You will save us. I can see it in you."

"I can't save anyone," Sunstreaker contradicted, thinking all too much of a pair of optics not unlike his own, as they gradually went gray. He clutched Hardshell, burying his face in the sturdy armor. "I've ruined everything I've touched."

Hardshell kept making that sound and the tension kept leaking out of Sunstreaker until he was limp and pliable. "There is always time to start anew," he said. "Your searcher loves you. Trusts you. Show him you deserve both."

Sunstreaker sighed. "I don't deserve any kindness."

"Everyone deserves kindness." Hardshell's hand stroked down his back before giving him a gentle pat. "Come. You need a bath. You will feel better after."

“A bath?” Sunstreaker hadn’t seen anything that qualified one, unless Hardshell was counting the weird wipedown the tiny, chittering Insecticons had given him. That wasn’t going to be relaxing at all.

“Yes.” Hardshell loosened the embrace so Sunstreaker could slip free of it, though he kept one hand on Sunstreaker’s shoulder as his knees wobbled. “We have burrowed well, my queen. It is what we do. Cybertron is much ravaged, but dig deep enough, and there are echoes of what it used to be.”

Sunstreaker stared up at the larger Insecticon, his optics wide. “You found a natural oilspring?” he asked as longing cropped up in his spark. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a decent soak.

“Indeed.”

Sunstreaker moaned and tilted against Hardshell, palming the Insecticon’s belly. “Are you sure I’m not dreaming?”

Hardshell chuckled and dipped down, abruptly sweeping Sunstreaker into his arms. “If you are, then so are we.” He looked down at Bob swarming around their feet. “Come, little searcher. You can join us in the bath.”

A bath.

Sunstreaker honestly moaned again. “You’re going to spoil me.”

“That is the idea.” Hardshell grinned and nuzzled him, but before he could pull away, Sunstreaker grabbed his head, pulling their mouths together for a kiss.

Need tightened and coiled in his groin, his belly. If he’d had any reservations, they were gone. He’d never felt so wanted, so loved, so needed.

Acceptance in the embrace of an Insecticon? He never would have guessed.

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## Chapter 5

Hardshell swept Sunstreaker out of the room that was to be his for the foreseeable future, and down a long hallway, back to what Sunstreaker was internally deeming the main corridor. It seemed to connect to everything, and while it wasn't particularly massive, it did appear well-traveled.

It branched off, left and right, and Hardshell took the right, Bob padding along behind them, the click-click-click of his feet a reassuring sound in a corridor that was otherwise silent. It was a bit unnerving. There was, distantly, a low and steady hum Sunstreaker thought might have been the bulk of the Hive, doing whatever it was they did throughout the day.

It took them longer than it should have, perhaps, only because Sunstreaker could not resist kissing Hardshell. He traced seams and armor protrusions. He swept his fingers over the kibble of Hardshell's frame, memorizing them with sight and touch. There was a low curl of want in his belly, and it tightened and tightened with every shared kiss.

Hardshell hummed against his lips and adjusted his grip on Sunstreaker's frame after one particularly lengthy kiss. "Be careful, my queen," he said, with a small smile on his face. "You distract me too much, and I might drop you."

"Oh, I'm distracting, am I?" Sunstreaker grinned. "I'll keep that in mind."

Hardshell nuzzled him, like Sunstreaker often imagined real lovers would. "Every inch of you is a distraction," he said, before he kept walking, a low rumble in his engine vibrating through Sunstreaker's frame.

Sunstreaker's grin widened. He tucked himself under Hardshell's chin, relaxing into the Insecticon's grip. "Will you tell me now?" he asked as he allowed himself to give in to the comfort.

"Tell you what, my queen?"

"Everything." Sunstreaker made a face. "And don't call me that. Just call me, Sunstreaker, okay?" He paused and reconsidered. "I mean, if it's a big deal, at least when we're alone?"

Hardshell paused mid-step and looked down at him, something fond in his visor. "Whatever you wish, Sunstreaker."

The way he purred Sunstreaker's designation had to be illegal. It went straight to Sunstreaker's array, making him stir, valve twitching with interest.

"That's better," Sunstreaker tried not to squeak. "But back to my original question...?"

Hardshell chuckled. "You'll have to be more specific." He started walking again, and they were definitely heading in a downward slope. "There is a lot of knowledge you lack. It will take many, many days for you to learn everything that is necessary for rulership of your Hive."

Primus.

Sunstreaker had always hated studying. He squinted up at the Insecticon. "Doesn't the change just

download the information into me?”

“It doesn’t work like that, I’m afraid.” Hardshell outright laughed, a grating, rustling noise that vibrated through Sunstreaker’s frame. “Some will come to you as instinctual, but most of it will not.”

“Fine. Then tell me about you,” Sunstreaker said.

He tipped his head to track their route. The walls were getting smoother now, and they glistened in the dim glow of whatever phosphorescence hung in globules in the ceiling. Some kind of natural light? Yet another question to add to the list.

“You know who I am,” Hardshell answered.

“I know your name,” Sunstreaker corrected. “But I don’t know who you are.”

Hardshell hummed thoughtfully. “Fair enough.”

The path diverged and once again, Hardshell took the right corridor, and a smell floated to Sunstreaker’s sensory suite. It was damp and earthen, but also with the distinct tang of warmed oil. There was a cleanliness to it, a purity. It hadn’t been spoiled by constant and relentless recycling or the filth of hundreds of mechs.

“You know that I am Queenmaker,” Hardshell said as the tunnel brightened ahead of them, still the softness of a natural luminescence, but brighter. “It means that I alone am capable of creating a new queen.” He paused and his voice quieted. “But it also means that I can never sire.”

Sunstreaker looked up at him, reading the regret in his voice. “You mean...?”

“I am sterile,” Hardshell said with a tilt of his head before his gaze turned fully forward. “There are others – the studs – who are tasked with fertilizing the eggs you’ll bear us, but I will never be one of them.”

Insecticon energy fields remained a mystery to him. But the harmonics in Hardshell’s vocalizer spoke of regret. Sadness. It must hurt, to have only one purpose in his functioning, and when that purpose was fulfilled, what then?

Sunstreaker frowned. “What does that mean? For you, I mean, after I’m fully... changed?”

“It means whatever you wish it to me. Historically, my duty is to the queen. I tend to your wants, your needs, and if you have no need of me, then I will lead your army as I always have, and you need never see me again.”

Hardshell ducked under a low overhang, and the oilsprings came into view. Sunstreaker gasped at the sight. A long, open room was filled with various pools, their liquids glowing with a pearlescent sheen. Little curls of steam rose from the surface, heated by something Sunstreaker couldn’t see.

Hardshell set Sunstreaker down by the nearest one, but instead of immediately diving in, Sunstreaker turned back toward Hardshell. He took the Queenmaker’s hand, which dwarfed his, and clasped it between his own.

“You promised you’d stay by my side,” Sunstreaker said, once again relying on a tone of command

he'd rarely utilized before. "Why do you think I'd want that to change?"

Hardshell's head dipped, his fingers curling into Sunstreaker's hand. "Past experience. But as you seem to be the exception to the rule, I bow to your preference." He curled forward, lips brushing over Sunstreaker's forehead. "Whatever you wish of me, my Sunstreaker."

He shivered, head to toe, plating lifting and flaring. "Stay with me," Sunstreaker asked, and he swallowed down the urge to beg.

Someone stay with him.

"Then so shall it be." Hardshell squeezed his hand and gestured to the oilspring with the other. "Do you wish to indulge?"

"More than anything." Sunstreaker eased his hands free, though Hardshell kept a grip on one, holding him steady as he stepped down into the slick, warm oil.

Oh, Primus. This must be what the Afterspark felt like.

Sunstreaker rumbled a moan. He waded further and further in, until he was submerged to mid-chassis, and the oil swirled around his frame, seeping into his joints and cables.

The oil rippled as Hardshell joined him, then splashed as Bob took a running leap, slapping with a loud thud onto the surface before sinking below. He was a hardy bug though, and his vents closed automatically before he could flood his fans. Silly bug.

Sunstreaker settled into a nook in the side of the oilspring – naturally carved he found – and sank in to his neck. He watched Bob paddle around, and Hardshell find another nook as well, a look of ease on the Insecticon's shoulders.

"That's what you want, right?" Sunstreaker asked as he tilted his head. "To stay beside me, I mean? Because I don't want you to say yes just because it's what I want."

Hardshell's lips curved into a toothy smile. "It's what I want," he rumbled. He braced his arms on the shelf of the spring behind him. "Your predecessor... she did not wish for my presence. She preferred Kickback, and, well, you've seen how that has affected him."

"Will you tell me about him?"

"As much as I can. His story is not mine." Hardshell cycled a ventilation, his expression smoothing out. "You may have noticed my markings." He gestured to his face and the three slashes Sunstreaker had noted long ago. "They denote my rank. I am your first, I will always be your first. To that end, Sharpshot is your second, and Kickback is your third."

It was not unlike the chain of command in the army. Easy enough to follow. Sunstreaker gestured for Hardshell to continue.

"I am Queenmaker," Hardshell said, "but I am also general of your army. Your soldiers and your scouts fall under my purview. Kickback is chief of your medics, your feeders, your nurses, your studs. And Sharpshot holds the history, the knowledge, of all who've come before. He also takes charge of the searchers, like your companion. Together, we are your cadre." He tipped his head in a respectful bow.

Sunstreaker had the suspicion that there was a deeper meaning behind stating the three ranked Insecticons were his. Judging by Kickback's reaction and the intonation behind Hardshell's words at least.

He gnawed on his bottom lip. "That's why my berth is the size it is."

"Yes, my queen." Hardshell rapped his taloned fingers on the edge of the spring. "Large enough for the three of us to join you anytime you wish."

Sunstreaker shook his head. "No. I only want people in my berth who want to be there." His tank churned at the idea of forcing anyone or commanding anyone or worse, someone joining him because of some stupid rule that said they had to.

"That is very good to know." Hardshell's tone turned syrupy warm, and Sunstreaker shivered. "I'll speak with Kickback, and encourage him to let you allay his fears. It may take some time."

Sunstreaker nibbled on his bottom lip. He wasn't a stranger to Kickback's experiences. "I know. It's fine. Whatever makes him comfortable."

Hardshell nodded and pushed off the edge of the spring, wading through the water toward Sunstreaker, deftly avoiding a happily splashing Bob in the process. "May I help you bathe?"

Sunstreaker worked his intake, another shiver of heat passing through his frame. "Only if you want to," he said.

"It would be my pleasure."

Hardshell reached over him, dripping oil as he did so, and snagged a nearby basket of supplies. He tugged it closer, withdrawing a cloth that didn't seem to be made of any material Sunstreaker had ever seen. Well, no. That wasn't precisely true. He'd seen similar materials on Earth, but never on Cybertron.

"I don't want to leave," Sunstreaker said as Hardshell lifted his arm and gently stroked the cloth over it, the texture as smooth as silk. "But I will need to go to the surface at some point. My comms don't work down here."

"A necessary safety precaution." Hardshell's tone was light, guarded, but there was now a tension in his armor.

"Yeah, and I get that, it's just, there are people who might come looking for me, and I want to make sure they don't," Sunstreaker replied.

A tremor ran across Hardshell's armor, his visor flashing. "We will destroy anyone who threatens you, my Sunstreaker."

"That's not what I meant." Sunstreaker rested a hand on his arm and squeezed to catch his attention. "I don't want any killing. I'm tired of killing." He was good at it, but damn if he didn't want that to be his only legacy. "If the others realize the Insecticons are here, they might try and kill you. The Swarm, you know."

"Oh, I'm well aware." Another tremor clattered Hardshell's frame before he cycled a ventilation,

and it calmed. He lifted Sunstreaker's other arm and began to wipe it down as well. "I appreciate you trying to protect us."

"Well... you're my Hive now," Sunstreaker said, a bit of a flush staining his face because it still sounded weird to admit that. "That's what I'm supposed to do."

Hardshell's cleaning paused, and he looked directly at Sunstreaker now. "The Hive protects the queen," he said, but it was thoughtful rather than correcting. "It shouldn't surprise me that you want to be different in that aspect as well."

"I'm a soldier. You can't think I'll just sit back and be protected. And if you're going to be my Hive, I can't sit and watch you be slaughtered either."

Hardshell hummed, making the oil vibrate and Sunstreaker by proxy. He shivered, especially when Hardshell cleaned his fingers, one by one, paying attention to the delicate mechanisms of his joints.

"A warrior queen," Hardshell murmured as if tasting the phrase. "Yes, I think you will suit us quite nicely. We will be a warrior hive."

"What else am I supposed to do?" Sunstreaker asked as he swallowed a moan, his entire frame sinking further into the oil, the warmth of it seeping all the way to his substructure. "I mean, I'm going to hate it if all I do is sit around and lay eggs."

Hardshell hummed again and stepped back, only to slide one hand down Sunstreaker's leg until he curved fingers around his ankle, lifting it from the spring to be dutifully scrubbed. "The Queen has many duties. Eggs are very important, but you are also mediator, diplomat, keeper of knowledge. You are our hub. Our nexus." One long finger teased into Sunstreaker's ankle, and Sunstreaker shivered again, bits of charge zinging up his spinal strut. "You will guide us toward peace with the surface mechs."

"Diplomat? Mediator?" Sunstreaker snorted a laugh before he could stop himself. "You picked the wrong mech if you wanted that."

"You will learn. I have faith in your abilities." Hardshell swept the washing cloth up Sunstreaker's leg, to mid-thigh, and down again, paying gentle attention to his knee joint. "Sharpshot will assist."

Sunstreaker couldn't remember the last time he felt so relaxed. It was almost dizzying, the steady cadence of Hardshell's hands over his frame, the rhythm of Hardshell's voice. It was too easy to forget that the mech embracing him, caressing him, was not a mech at all, but an Insecticon, albeit one completely unlike any Sunstreaker had ever faced.

His valve tingled in memory.

"A-am I the first?" Sunstreaker asked, trying to distract himself from the low curl of arousal building in his belly. "The first attempt at finding a new queen, I mean."

"There were others."

"Yeah? What happened to them?"

Hardshell was quiet for a moment as he shifted to Sunstreaker's other leg, bending his focus upon it as though it was the most important task to him at the moment.

"One refused and was returned to the surface unharmed. They could not bring themselves to see us as intelligent creatures." His engine rumbled with offense. "They were no great loss."

"Why did you even consider them in the first place?"

"Our searcher evaluated their strength of will. It was adequate." Hardshell clicked his mandibles together, and it sounded like disgust. "The searcher was relieved of duty afterward."

'Relieved of duty'? Why did it sound like the searcher wasn't so much relieved as he was killed and/or consumed?

"What about the others?"

Hardshell's hands slid up, smoothing over his thigh, and Sunstreaker's ventilations quickened. "One did not understand our guarantee of safety and attacked us. We were forced to kill them. And the last one did not survive the process."

Sunstreaker stilled. "This could kill me?"

Hardshell's hands rested on his knees, and he looked up at Sunstreaker. "You have no concern. You are much stronger than them. They did not survive the first input, while your frame already craves the second."

"Does it?" Sunstreaker asked.

Hardshell tilted his head, and his hands slid up, thumbs caressing the inner plating of Sunstreaker's thighs, until they found his interfacing array. They brushed over it, and Sunstreaker sucked in a ventilation, a shiver of need clawing down his backstrut.

Sunstreaker parted his thighs further without thinking about it, and Hardshell's second touch was firmer. He bit off a groan, hips canting into Hardshell's fingers.

"This is why you are perfect," Hardshell murmured. "You are strong. You are what we need. You will be our queen."

Another stroke of his thumbs and Sunstreaker's panel snapped open, his sensors immediately bombarded by a wave of warm oil. He sucked in a moan, grasped Hardshell's shoulders, rolled his hips.

"Would you like more, my queen?" Hardshell asked, and his voice was deep and resonating, full of lascivious intent.

Primus.

Sunstreaker pulled him closer. "Yeah," he said, trying to throw his legs around Hardshell's waist, pull the Insecticon toward his waiting valve. "So long as it doesn't kill me."

Hardshell chuckled and slipped his hands around Sunstreaker's aft, lifting him from the shelf with ease. He swapped their places, seating himself and positioning Sunstreaker to straddle him, thighs

splayed wide to accommodate his wider frame.

"It will not," Hardshell said, his hands sliding up and down Sunstreaker's back, teasing into seams.

Sunstreaker shivered. Hardshell touched nothing erogenous, yet the caress of his fingers set Sunstreaker's sensornet alive with want. He moaned, valve clenching on nothing, squeezing out lubricant into the warm oil.

"It will make you stronger, faster, better. It will make you our queen."

Hardshell's spike nudged at his valve, and Sunstreaker canted his hips eagerly. Hardshell held him in place, sliding into him slow and careful, gliding along every internal sensor. He cupped Sunstreaker's left hip, but the other hand cradled his head, tipping his head back to nuzzle him.

"May I kiss you, my queen?" he asked.

Asked. He asked for everything. He offered so much.

Sunstreaker snagged him by the back of the head and pulled him into the kiss, thrusting his glossa into Hardshell's mouth, past dangerous denta. He moaned and sucked on Hardshell's glossa, the Insecticon's odd, earthy flavor suddenly intoxicating to him.

Hardshell's spike pierced him easily, with no need for the extended stretching their first encounter had taken, and it spilled crackles of charge along Sunstreaker's valve lining.

He spasmed in Hardshell's arms, gasping with pleasure, backstrut arching.

Hardshell took him slowly, like he was trying to taste every inch of Sunstreaker's valve, until he was fully seated. Sunstreaker's valve stretched wide, his thighs as well, hips aching from the splay, but it was a good ache. It made him crave more.

He moaned again, burying his face against Hardshell's intake, hips jerking in little rocks, his spike grinding against Hardshell's abdomen, catching on rises and nubs on Hardshell's armor.

"My beautiful queen," Hardshell murmured, and Sunstreaker gasped, an unexpected overload sweeping over his frame like a tide of charge, prickling over his armor, seeping warmth into his pelvic array.

He sank, like liquid, into Hardshell's lap, and Hardshell cradled him like something precious, as he rocked his hips, extending Sunstreaker's overload, his spike swelling incrementally, filling every nook and cranny in Sunstreaker's valve. The tip rubbed and caught on Sunstreaker's ceiling node, extending the pleasure.

There was no pain. Not even when Hardshell's extenders sank into the lining of his valve, and the electric trickle of the upload cascaded through his array. Sunstreaker moaned, dizzy with pleasure, overloading again, so quickly on the heels of the first. His valve throbbed, cycling hungrily, and Hardshell never stopped stroking him, murmuring to him, constant compliments and encouragement, until Sunstreaker swam in the praise.

"See?" Hardshell crooned as he swelled and swelled and swelled, until he was locked within Sunstreaker, tying them together, only able to shift in the smallest of increments. "You are perfect. You fit. You were made to be ours."

It sounded genuine. It felt true. It felt like belonging, like something settled warm and firm in the center of Sunstreaker's chassis, right below his spark. A tender pulse of acceptance, and for a moment, it was so foreign he thought he might need to evict it, until he realized how desperately he wanted to keep it.

"Your queen," he agreed as another wave of pleasure swept out from his valve, following the static-charge pulse of an upload. His fingers clawed into Hardshell's seams, his hips twitching but getting nowhere, valve stretched wide around Hardshell's knot.

He overloaded again, as if the acceptance triggered something inside of him, wave upon wave of crashing pleasure, flooding his frame. His valve spasmed, his spike erupted, and for a moment, his senses went absolutely white from the ecstasy.

He had no energy left in the aftermath. He felt as weak as a newspark, or a mech recently freed from a stasis chamber. His legs were as jelly, his limbs too heavy to lift. Hardshell was a comfortable, thrumming weight beneath him, still firm within his valve.

"Rest, my queen," Hardshell murmured as Sunstreaker sank against his chassis, sated and weary, little twitches running along his armor. "You are safe with me. Rest."

Safe.

Yes.

Sunstreaker was certain of it.

~

Waking in the berth was becoming a habit to Sunstreaker. It was hard to mind, however, given the comfort radiating through his frame, the warm rumble of Bob recharging at his feet, and the cradle of Hardshell's arms around him.

"How do you feel?" Hardshell asked, his voice rumbling through Sunstreaker's audials.

"Drowsy," Sunstreaker admitted. He felt languid, like it was too much trouble to climb out of the berth. "Is it always going to be like this?"

Hardshell stroked his arm with long and gentle sweeps of his fingers. "For the first couple weeks, the first dozen uploads, yes. Your frame will be going through much change, and it will take a lot out of you."

"Unfortunate," Sunstreaker sighed. It was hard to stay focused. He felt tired, but not in a way that left him weak and uncomfortable. It was a relaxing tired, like he could stay in the berth for a few weeks and doze comfortably.

"It will be worth it." Hardshell stroked the side of his face, and there was something reverent in it. "You will be stronger with every upload. Your stamina will increase. The times between rest will decrease. You will assimilate with ease."



Assimilate.

Sunstreaker didn't like the taste of the word. It was foul, like rotten energon. It tasted like Hunter and the Machina. Like losing his sense of self.

"Ease," he repeated. "I notice you didn't warn me about the danger. So much for your ease." He injected venom into his tone, since he couldn't work up the energy for anything more. His limbs were too sluggish. Hardshell was too warm.

It was too late to change his mind anyway. It was easier to see rationale in the aftermath. Harder when the need started boiling in him again, making him pliable.

Hardshell's engine rumbled. "Would it have made a difference, my queen?"

"Do you think I have a fragging death wish?" Sunstreaker demanded, and he would have drawn away from Hardshell, would have shoved himself into some distance, if he could get his frame to obey his commands.

Hardshell's quiet spoke more than an immediate reply.

"You may not have wanted to die, but you weren't trying to live either," Hardshell said, at length. "You came to us broken. You are still broken."

Sunstreaker gritted his denta. He wished it were further from the truth, but Hardshell's words struck too close to home. His field flashed with frustration, and that was when Bob woke from recharge. He trundled across the berth, clambering into the small space of Sunstreaker's lap, worry etched into the awkward pats of his secondary hands.

"I'm fine, bug," Sunstreaker sighed, stroking over Bob's head and scratching at the base of his antennae. "You know, you and Starscream would get along, Hardshell. He's not above manipulating others for his own needs either."

"I sense you were attempting to insult me, but as I believe you belong here with us, I am not." Hardshell's engine rumbled, vibrating against Sunstreaker's frame, not unlike the way Bob purred when he was happy about something. "You were meant to be ours."

Sunstreaker sank into the warmth of Hardshell's embrace, idly petting Bob as he did so. He'd never been good with words. He was a mech of action. He hadn't the energy for action right now, but also, what was the point. He'd agreed to this. He'd survived the first upload. Clearly, he was already on the path to changing.

There wasn't anything left for him at the surface. He might as well continue this path. Bob brought him here for a reason.

"I knew from the moment the searcher brought you to us, that you would be the one. You were strong. You were determined. You had a spark fit for a queen." Hardshell's tone was thick with praise, with reverence. It was hard not to fall under his spell. "You will be a queen I am eager to serve. You will heal us, and perhaps we might heal you in return."

Bob nudged his head under Sunstreaker's fingers, his antennae wiggling with delight. He chirred up at Sunstreaker as if agreeing with Hardshell.

“Whose side are you on anyway, bug?” Sunstreaker murmured, but there was no chastisement in his voice. Bob was the only one who stayed at his side, who wouldn’t leave him.

They’d saved each other.

Maybe Hardshell had a point.

“If you are angry with me, I will understand. If you wish to leave this place, we will mourn, but again, I will understand.” Hardshell’s voice was tight, carrying the weight of his disappointment. “But we are meant to be yours, Sunstreaker. Do not throw us away.”

Sunstreaker sighed and sank into Hardshelle’s embrace, tucked as he was against the Insecticon’s chassis. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m too tired.”

It was an excuse.

Hardshell didn’t call him on it.

“Rest, my queen,” he said. “I will guard your sleep.”

Sunstreaker believed him, at least in this.

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## Chapter 6

The next few months were a blur of pleasure for Sunstreaker. The changes to his frame were subtle at first, and it took several weeks before he could identify any noticeable shifts to his appearance.

"Will I be able to fly?" he asked Hardshell during a moment of lucidity, himself wrapped in the Insecticon's arms, soaking up Hardshell's warmth and comfort.

"Queens do not fly," Hardshell answered as he stroked Sunstreaker's abdomen and sides, tracing his transformation seams. He seemed to delight in touching Sunstreaker, talons dipping into the lines of his frame, as if memorizing every minute change. "But you will be the most beautiful."

Sunstreaker made a noncommittal noise, his frame floating in a haze of comfort and satisfaction, dozing in the space between waking and pleasure.

"Would you have wanted to fly?"

"Sideswipe was the one who wanted wings," Sunstreaker murmured with a sharp ache of grief rattling through his spark. "He would've been disappointed."

"Sideswipe was your kin?"

"Brother."

Hardshell hummed, and his hands slid down Sunstreaker's sides, to his hips, to the angle of his aft and down to his thighs. He drew them apart, and Sunstreaker assisted with a soft sigh, his valve already tingling.

"You miss him." Hardshell stroked paths over Sunstreaker's legs, as he nudged between Sunstreaker's thighs, and *want* pulsed hot and thready through Sunstreaker's lines. "He's the part of you that can never be ours."

Moist heat ghosted over Sunstreaker's array. He shivered, nodes throbbing with anticipation, valve cycling hard, squeezing out lubricant.

Longing rose up in his intake, threatened to choke him. "I don't want to talk about Sideswipe," Sunstreaker said, awareness shoving him out of the hazy state of pleasure, dropping him back into his frame as Hardshell nuzzled his valve and painted his inner thigh with little licks.

"Then we won't," Hardshell's visor flashed warm and tender before he licked Sunstreaker, glossa rasping over his anterior cluster.

Sunstreaker gasped, frame turning liquid, eager. The pleasure rose up in him like a tidal wave, poignant and consuming.

He had a chronometer. But somehow, it was too hard to mark the passing of time. He recharged. He woke. His periods of lucidity varied, but were usually brief. Hardshell fed him energon. Tended to him. Bathed him. Spoke with him.

They interfaced, Sunstreaker eagerly accepting Hardshell into his valve, accepting each new

upload. It didn't feel like he was changing. A part of him wondered if it was not all some ruse. If the Insecticons wanted a pet surface mech to frag.

He recharged after overloading, often with Hardshell still knotted within him, his hands sweeping reverent and tender over Sunstreaker's frame.

Once he woke alone and in pain, his entire frame aching and burning as if he'd been stomped on by a combiner. Repeatedly. Someone had set his sensornet aflame and his spark strobed with panic. He thrashed on the berth, wanting to claw out his lines, claw out everything, if it would make the pain *stop*.

*"Hardshell!"*

A light in the darkness, dim but soothing. Familiar fingers stroked over his frame, and everywhere they touched, relief bloomed, like a balm.

"Shhh, I am here, my queen," Hardshell murmured, and the warmth of his embrace took the worst of the sting away. "The pain will pass. It is temporary. But I am here."

Sunstreaker would have been ashamed were it anyone else. He let himself be cuddled. He buried his face against Hardshell's chassis, in-venting the Insecticon's half-organic, half-metallic odor, starting to recognize it as safety and comfort. As loyalty.

The pain eased to a dull throb, an ache he could live with, though his limbs twitched and his sensornet crawled.

"What's happening?" Sunstreaker croaked, his fingers curled into claws, refusing to straighten or be eased.

"It is the change," Hardshell said, and his entire frame took on a purring vibration, soothing away the worst of the pain. "Shhh. It is almost done. Rest, my queen. Rest."

Sunstreaker obeyed.

It was better than the alternative.

~

The next time he woke, his quarters had gained another Insecticon, one ragged line adorning his face, wings rustling behind him.

"The first stage has been completed," Kickback informed Sunstreaker as he lay in the safety of Hardshell's arms. Kickback's tone was removed, his frame language wary and unfriendly.

"Congratulations. You survived."

"Disappointed?" Sunstreaker asked.

Kickback's antennae twitched. His jaw tightened, visible behind the grill of his mask. "You are not the one I would have chosen," he said, words accentuated with a hiss. "Would that we had no need

of a queen, I would--"

"Kickback." Hardshell's voice, full of warning, rose from behind Sunstreaker, though Sunstreaker hadn't heard him stir or online. "Speak with respect to your queen."

"No." Sunstreaker struggled to sit up, every inch of him feeling as if he'd been scraped raw, and he fumbled, like a newspark, his limbs responding but without coordination, like he wasn't used to them. "I haven't earned his trust or his respect. He doesn't owe me anything."

"You are Queen," Hardshell said, bristling with menace, with offense on Sunstreaker's behalf.

He managed to pull himself up, but it left him dizzy and exhausted. Sunstreaker rubbed his temple and tried to focus on Kickback, who wavered into two shapes before coalescing into one. Primus, he was tired.

"I spent too much of my life being told I had to respect someone because I was told to, not because they'd earned it." Sunstreaker slanted a look of chastisement at Hardshell before he turned his attention back to Kickback. "I won't do that here."

Kickback had dipped his head in deference, but he raised it a little now, daring to meet Sunstreaker's gaze. "It would be your right."

Sunstreaker snorted. "No, it's not. If I'm queen, then it won't be because I'm going to trample on the rights of my mechs. I want you to serve me because you want to, not because you have to. The last thing I wanna do is get killed in a coup because you hate me."

Hardshell bristled. "We would never!" His outrage was tangible in his vocals, but there was something in the flicker of Kickback's optics, in the way he flinched, that suggested either Hardshell was lying, or he didn't know such a thing had happened before.

Perhaps by Kickback's hands.

Perhaps there was a reason their previous queen didn't make it out of the collapsed tunnel.

Kickback was, after all, their chief medic. Sunstreaker knew Ratchet had over a dozen ways to kill a mech without anyone being wise about it. Medics knew the ins and outs of a person's frame. If Kickback wanted to, he could have ensured their queen didn't survive the attack.

There was a reason Sunstreaker wanted to earn their loyalty. He didn't want to be a leader his subordinates plotted to unseat.

"Understood," Kickback said, and he bowed, shallow, barely a tip of his head, but it was progress. "I invite you to impress me, your majesty. My trust is here to be earned."

Kickback dismissed himself, leaving Sunstreaker and Hardshell in a tense silence.

Sunstreaker sagged back into the berth, energy spent. He wasn't as exhausted as he'd been since this whole thing began, but a few more hours of recharge would be welcome.

Hardshell rose from the berth to retrieve the decanter of energon, pouring Sunstreaker a small cube of it. "You're not angry."

"I'm not a tyrant," Sunstreaker said, and accepted the cube, nodding his head in thanks as he sipped at the sweet liquid, which always tasted as if it had been freshly purified.

"Do you still think you are not perfect for us?" Hardshell asked.

Sunstreaker didn't offer an answer to that, and Hardshell didn't push. He set the decanter aside. "How do you feel?"

"Sore."

"As Kickback said, the first stage is complete. The worst of it is done. The nanites have settled into your substructure."

Sunstreaker glanced down at his frame, amazed to find he was relatively clean, considering all he'd done for the past couple weeks was frag and recharge.

Wait. He wasn't just clean.

Sunstreaker cycled his optics. His paint had changed in hue, darkening from the brilliant and bright yellow, to a more vibrant gold. His armor felt thicker to the touch, sturdier, too. Had his fingers lengthened? Were they slimmer now?

"Am I different?" Sunstreaker asked.

"Beautifully so. Not fully changed, but the alterations have begun." Hardshell held out a hand. "Would you like to see?"

"Yeah." Sunstreaker took his hand. Hardshell helped him off the berth, and find his feet. He wobbled at first, but quickly gained strength. "Where's Bob?"

"With the other searchers. He's been making friends," Hardshell said as he threaded their fingers together and escorted Sunstreaker from the room, stepping out of the private suite and into the hallways, still as humid as before, but more tolerable. In fact, it was a little chilly.

Sunstreaker said as much.

Hardshell chuckled. "No, my queen. That is your frame adapting. It will be comfortable to you soon enough."

He recognized the route Hardshell was taking -- back toward the lower levels and the oil springs. Sunstreaker's spark spun with delight. But there was something else in the atmosphere, like a crowd of energy fields, except he knew Insecticons didn't have energy fields. There was something in the air: anticipation, excitement, relief. It thrummed along his frame; he swore he could taste it.

It was a song without words, without music. He couldn't hear it, but he could feel it, all the way down to his substructure. There was a steady rhythm, which the pulse of his spark matched, and the atmosphere crackled with a sense of living beings, rather than the slow, oppressive tread toward death Sunstreaker remembered.

He stopped in the middle of the walkway and cocked his head. He expanded his sensors, trying to determine a direction, but the sensation came from all around him. It throbbed through the ground, into his feet. It pressed along his armor, sliding like a tangible presence. It whispered in his audials

without making a sound.

"What is it?" Hardshell asked.

"There's something..." Sunstreaker lifted his free hand, twisting his fingers through the air. "I don't know how to describe it."

Hardshell's engine purred, his kibble rubbing together in a sort of chirring noise Bob liked to make. "You've become aware of us."

Sunstreaker blinked. "What?"

Hardshell stepped behind him, placed his hands on Sunstreaker's shoulders. "You can't read our thoughts, but you can sense us. Your Hive is aware of you in return. Can't you feel our delight? Our relief? We are happy to have a Queen again."

"I can feel something," Sunstreaker hedged.

"You can feel us," Hardshell said, and he nuzzled the back of Sunstreaker's head, his ex-vents warm and humid. "This is good news. You are assimilating even faster than we could have hoped." He rubbed his hands down Sunstreaker's arms. "Come. Allow me to show you the changes."

"I'm going to want a mirror in my room. This is ridiculous," Sunstreaker grumbled.

"It will be done."

Down, down, down, they went. Further into the depths of the Hive, deeper into Cybertron. The weight of the planet lurked above Sunstreaker's head. It felt comforting. It felt right. Had he adapted to this as well?

They passed other Insecticons, of all shapes and sizes, many of whom stopped to stare at Sunstreaker as he passed, their optics large and luminous, their frame language reverent and servile. Very few of them spoke.

Very few of them could, according to Hardshell.

"Of those in your Hive, only the warriors have the ability to utilize mechspeak," Hardshell explained. "The soldiers and the medics, the scouts and the searchers, they are like your Bob, understanding of mechspeak but unable to use it. All of the others will be able to understand you as Queen, but they do not communicate in a way you'd understand as a surface-dweller."

Sunstreaker glanced above him, at the tiny Insecticons scurrying around. They had multiple limbs, but were lightly armored, and two pairs of optics, one set larger and one set smaller.

"Those are the builders," Hardshell gestured above him. "They maintain the Hive. They fall under Sharpshot's management."

"Can they talk?" Sunstraker asked.

"No. They respond to the Queen, to commands of those considered higher-rank, but they are akin to drones." Hardshell paused and held out a hand, reaching above him to one of the builders.

It squeaked and scuttled out onto his fingers, about the same size of Hardshell's fist, and clung to the back of his hand with all of its limbs. It chittered at him, antennae waving, and Hardshell chuckled quietly as he lowered the builder in Sunstreaker's direction.

"They do not live very long, but they are of utmost importance to the Hive," Hardshell said as he offered the builder to Sunstreaker.

It best resembled an Earth spider, in Sunstreaker's opinion. Long, spindly legs. Stout frame. Small. It chittered in Sunstreaker's direction, raising two forearms upright, and a pulse of what felt like affection and delight radiated from the builder.

"It recognizes me," Sunstreaker murmured as he gently stroked the builder's head with two fingers, grinning as it bumped up to his touch much like Bob seeking affection.

"Of course."

The builder squeaked and leapt from Hardshell's hand, landing on Sunstreaker's wrist instead. It clutched him with spindly limbs, and Sunstreaker stilled as said limbs wrapped around his wrist like a hug. The builder chittered again, and a sense of warmth and affection flowed out from it.

Okay. It was kind of cute. In the way Bob was cute when Sunstreaker stopped seeing him as an Insecticon, and started seeing him as a valued companion.

"You won't be able to talk to it, but you will be able to communicate." Hardshell smiled, and there was an odd softness in his gaze when he did so. "Perhaps not now, but soon."

Sunstreaker's lips curved into a gentle smile. "I remember when I first found Bob. I didn't know any better, but I did know I couldn't kill him, and I couldn't let him die." He cycled a ventilation. "We're not to blame for what we are."

"Astute," Hardshell said. "No wonder he thought you'd be good for us."

"I've never been good at talking to others," Sunstreaker mused aloud, because it was true. But for some reason, he found reading the frame language of the Insecticons a far easier task. "I'm kind of looking forward to talking to these guys, though."

"Any one of your Hive will be thrilled to speak with their queen," Hardshell said, and he reached for the builder on Sunstreaker's hand. "But you wanted a mirror, and one I shall provide." He nudged the builder with his talontip. "Come now. Back to work."

It hunkered down, spitting a noise at him, and Sunstreaker chuckled despite himself. "It sounds like he doesn't want to go."

"That is not its choice," Hardshell said with a stern tone and an edge of a growl. He tapped the builder at the apex of its frame, what could generously be called a head.

It hissed at him.

Sunstreaker laughed. "Does he have a name?"

"No, *it* does not." Hardshell's engine revved, and he glared at the little builder, which clung all the tighter to Sunstreaker's wrist.



"He can stay. It's fine," Sunstreaker said, and lifted his wrist toward his shoulder, thinking very hard about the builder moving from his wrist to it. "You can be Scuttle, hm? Would you like that?"

A cheerful chitter was Scuttle's response as he scampered from Sunstreaker's wrist to take up residence on his shoulder, tucking in against his clavicular strut. If it was possible for a builder to be smug, surely that was the look Scuttle gave Hardshell.

"You are too indulgent, my queen," Hardshell said, but affection flowed from him in waves. Appreciation, too.

Sunstreaker stroked the top of Scuttle's head with a finger. "I want to be a queen who is adored, not one they serve because they're supposed to."

Hardshell tilted his head. "You want to be chosen."

Sunstreaker didn't answer. Not right away. Hardshell was too close to the truth, and it stung. Yes, Sunstreaker wanted to be chosen. He'd spent too much of his lifetime being the ignored, the looked over, the left behind.

It was partially his own fault, he knew, but that didn't make it easier to bear.

"I don't want to be a tyrant," Sunstreaker said, at length.

He thought of Megatron, who led with an iron fist, but had gained an army because of his sweet words and his empty promises.

He thought of Starscream, who lied and manipulated and schemed, who sought power but had no idea what he'd do when he got it.

He thought of Optimus, willing to win a war at any cost, a Prime they could believe in, but whose own faults kept the war at a stalemate.

He thought of Prowl, pragmatic and efficient, willing to sacrifice whoever he needed in order to obtain victory, but forgetting the depths of the cost.

Sunstreaker didn't want to be like any of them.

"I want them to love me," Sunstreaker said, and his face heated with embarrassment. If it had been anyone else, he'd have never admitted it, but Hardshell already knew how pathetic Sunstreaker was, and they wanted him for a queen anyway.

Hardshell's expression softened. He stroked the back of his knuckles over Sunstreaker's cheek, and only then did Sunstreaker realize he was closer in height to Hardshell. Where he'd only been as tall as Hardshell's mid-chassis, he now reached Hardshell's chin.

"You will be loved," Hardshell murmured, and Sunstreaker's spark ached and danced in his chassis. "Come. Let me show you how you've changed."

And change he had.

Sunstreaker stood in front of a large mirror, seeing himself in full, and he almost didn't recognize the mech staring back at him. His paint was a luminous gold. He'd gained mass in all the right places, broadening his shoulders, his chassis, highlighting the slim angles down toward his pelvic span. His headfins had elongated and extended, more elaborate in construction, and he'd also grown in height, with a sleekness to match.

No longer was he boxy angles built entirely to smash. There was an elegance to his design now. He would be more maneuverable, flexible.

His hips had broadened, which Sunstreaker supposed made sense, if he was to... errr... birth eggs in some manner. But it looked good.

He examined his fingertips, where nubs suggested he might earn talons, like Hardshell's. Other nubs on his armor ends hinted at future spikes and protrusions, like Bob's or Sharpshot's.

Most startling, however, were his optics. They were not the same shade of blue anymore. He no longer had Sunstreaker's optics, the ones he could see in Sideswipe's face as well. He no longer had his twin staring back at him.

"You are beautiful, and you will be more beautiful still," Hardshell said, heedless to the mild panic flickering through Sunstreaker's spark, a well of grief so powerful, it made his knees wobble.

He turned away from the mirror, hands pulling into fists.

"You disagree?" Hardshell asked.

Sunstreaker shook his head. "My optics are different."

"Yes. Your vision will improve."

"Their *color*

"Is that an issue?"

Scuttle chittered, pressing into his intake, as though sensing Sunstreaker's distress and seeking to offer comfort.

"I wasn't expecting it."

It wasn't an issue. It's not an issue. He shouldn't be upset. Why was he upset? Sideswipe was gone. His optic color didn't make a difference.

Sideswipe was gone, and every bit of him Sunstreaker could see in the mirror, it was going away, too.

"Where's Bob?" Sunstreaker asked, suddenly desperate for his companion, desperate for something familiar.

"I can summon him, if you wish." Hardshell stepped closer, and Sunstreaker jerked back, raising a hand before Hardshell could make contact.

He didn't want Hardshell's comfort. Hardshell was unfamiliar, alien. He wouldn't understand. He couldn't understand. His comfort came with a price, the role he wanted for Sunstreaker. He didn't

offer comfort for Sunstreaker's sake.

"I want Bob, and I want my room," Sunstreaker said, spinning away from the mirrors and the call of the oilsprings, heading toward the door. He couldn't remember the entire route back, but he knew enough.

Hardshell hastened to follow. "I have summoned the searcher. He will come to your quarters. Are you alright, my queen? Shall I summon Kickback?"

"I don't need a medic," Sunstreaker said. "I need to be alone."

"As you wish."

Hardshell said nothing further, as though he knew words would be pointless. He silently guided Sunstreaker back to the suite which was for his personal use, keeping a polite distance between them, but the worry and agitation he radiated only made Sunstreaker's own emotions spike into unease.

He could feel it now, the worry of the whole Hive, as though they could sense Sunstreaker's distress and reflected it back, an endless echo chamber of anxiety. It nauseated him.

Sharpshot waited outside Sunstreaker's door. "I am here. Here to assist. Assist, I may?"

"No. I want to be left alone," Sunstreaker said as he swept past, only to pause in the doorway, in case either of them intended to follow.

They didn't. They stood there, watching him, and first stage or not, Sunstreaker could feel their worry and their fear. It gnawed on him. He itched to fix it.

He needed to fix himself first.

"If you need us--"

"I know where to find you," Sunstreaker said, and he pushed the door shut, leaving them on one side, and him on the other.

Alone.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 7

Through the distress in his spark, Sunstreaker registered a sound. It pierced the anxiety, the tremble of his armor, the whirling of his thoughts.

He wasn't alone.

Scuttle pressed against his intake, and Bob. Bob was here, too. Bounding toward him, antennae twitching left and right.

Sunstreaker sank to his knees, gathering the silly bug up in his arms. It was easier than it used to be. He was bigger now, had a wider reach.

Bob chirped at him, and nuzzled his face. He asked without words, though Sunstreaker could feel his concern now. His affection, too. So genuine and without expectations.

"I'm not okay, bug. I don't know how to be okay," Sunstreaker said.

Bob's secondary hands patted him. He purred, the rumbles vibrating against Sunstreaker's armor in new ways now with all his extra kibble and thicker substructure.

Sideswipe was gone, and bit by bit, Sunstreaker was losing what's left of him. There was nothing left for him on Cybertron, and Bob had led him here, to this Hive, but desperate to have something of his own again, was he surrendering himself? His memories?

His brother?

Was he making the right choice?

Sunstreaker was not one to consider himself an indecisive mess, but one glimpse in the mirror had brought the reality of his decision crashing down. The word 'assimilate' kept repeating in his head.

Would he even be Sunstreaker when this was all over?

Or worse.

Did he want to be?

Scuttle made a mournful noise against Sunstreaker's intake. Bob chirped and patted him again, his worry intensifying.

No. Not just Bob's worry. Sunstreaker felt it now, the trickling but increasing pressure of the Hive, surrounding him like a physical weight. Sunstreaker's immediate, demanding instinct was to soothe the worry, offer reassurance to the Hive. His Hive.

Primus, he needed some fresh air. He needed a new perspective. He needed...

He needed to get out of here. Not to leave, no, but to know he could walk if he wanted. To contact Ironhide, just in case, see if there was anything left for him out there.

Just this once.

Sunstreaker pushed to his feet, frame aching and creaking. Exhaustion tugged at his lines. His valve twitched, and the stirrings of need made themselves known.

He ignored them. He took a deep breath, draping himself in royal poise.

"Bob. Come," Sunstreaker said, and strode from the room, chin lifted high, shoulders back.

Hardshell and Sharpshot both waited on the other side, but Sunstreaker didn't give them a chance to speak.

"I'm going to the surface," he said, leaving them no room to wheedle otherwise. "Show me the way, or I'll find it myself."

The two Insecticons exchanged a glance, but Sharpshot bowed and excused himself, while Hardshell held out a hand. "Allow me to escort you, my queen."

Sunstreaker ignored the offer of the hand, though a part of him cried out to touch Hardshell, to fall into his embrace, to greedily consume another upload. No. While he had his wits about him, he needed to be sure.

"Show me," Sunstreaker said, and he strode past Hardshell, armor clamped, ignoring the internal wail of rejection. He was stronger than his instincts.

"As you wish."

Hardshell took the lead, and Sunstreaker followed, Bob at his heels, Scuttle tucked against his intake. The humidity of the corridors seeped around him, the cavern floors damp and sticky beneath his feet. Steadily, they climbed upward in a tense silence, Hardshell not speaking, and Sunstreaker not offering any conversation.

He rubbed one arm with his hand, tracing the nodules building along his seams, places where spikes were sure to emerge, once his transformation was complete. Would he recognize himself afterward? Would the face in the mirror be a stranger?

Darkened corridors grew less moist, became more arid, a sensation of emptiness clinging to the walls. Sunstreaker left the atmosphere of living things behind, his awareness of the Hive stretching impossibly thin, like a tether threatening to snap. He wondered if that was the extent of the reach, or if further uploads would extend it.

If he continued on this path.

There were larger Insecticons here -- less civilian in appearance, more like the warriors and the soldiers Sunstreaker had faced in the Swarm. They were larger, stronger, better armored. There was an awareness in their gazes as they watched Sunstreaker pass, smaller scouts milling around their feet, some smaller even than Bob.

They parted for Sunstreaker and Hardshell. A few bowed. Their curious gazes tickled over Sunstreaker's armor. They were on guard for a possible incursion -- Sunstreaker swore he could smell the wariness in the air. It had a bitter reek, an acrid blend of fear and excitement.

Up and up and up and up. Until the climbing angle of the grade evened out, and the walls of the tunnel were choppier and uneven, as if carved out in haste rather than with deliberate precision.

Sunstreaker's comm crackled to life, hissing static at him. He cringed and dialed it down.

The tunnel grew narrow, until he could no longer walk beside Hardshell, but behind the Insecticon. A whisper of air teased Sunstreaker's sensors. He wrinkled his nose. It smelled... like death. It was bitter and ashy, and there was something rotten on the air. How had he never noticed it before?

"We're close?" Sunstreaker asked.

"Yes, my queen."

He touched Hardshell's arm, and Hardshell paused in the tunnel, half-turned back toward Sunstreaker, his visor a pale ochre gleam in the dim. He held himself with a rigidity Sunstreaker matched. He was coolly polite, but there was an undercurrent of fear radiating from him.

It was a little unfair of Sunstreaker, to be able to read him with relative ease now.

"I want to be alone," Sunstreaker said.

Hardshell looked at him, tense and wary, and Sunstreaker gave in to the screeching fear from the Hive. He said, "I'm coming back."

Hardshell nodded and stepped aside, leaving enough room in the narrow tunnel for Sunstreaker to pass. "And if you do not, then we'll know."

Fair enough.

"Come on, bug," Sunstreaker said as Scuttle chittered and pressed into his throat, tiny frame trembling.

He emerged from a narrow crevasse, tucked within an overhang of the landscape, into the open air of Cybertron. A moment of vertigo struck him then, a sense of being exposed, of danger, and Sunstreaker hesitated. He'd never been afraid of open spaces before.

This had to be the coding at work.

Sunstreaker steeled himself and stepped fully out, under the open sky. He didn't recognize where he was, but then, he didn't expect to. He was in some kind of low basin, ridges rising all around him, the whole area jagged and fractured and jumbled. The perfect way to conceal a tunnel, really. Some of the cliff faces were sheer and unclimbable, others would take some effort, but he could scale them given time.

A glint of something at the top of the highest ridge caught his optic. Sunstreaker squinted, trying to zoom in on it. Was that an antenna? It was hard to tell at this distance, but he hoped it was. He had a feeling he'd need a boost to the signal.

He found an outcropping that would make a decent perch. Sunstreaker sat, and Bob clambered up beside him, immediately throwing himself half in Sunstreaker's lap.

Sunstreaker chuckled and scritched behind Bob's audials. "If I left, would you go with me?"

Bob licked his fingers.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Sunstreaker sat for a few more moments, bracing himself, before he dialed Ironhide's comm code, and hoped he could manage a clear enough connection.

Ironhide answered immediately. "Sunstreaker! Where the frag are ya, slagger?"

Sunstreaker huffed a laugh to himself. "You wouldn't understand if I told you, old timer," he said. "I found Bob. I'm safe. But I don't know if I'm coming back."

"Kid, if this is because--"

"It's not," Sunstreaker interrupted, because he didn't want to drag out old wounds. Not right now. "I just think I've found somewhere I can go."

"In the wilderness?"

"I don't belong in that city, Ironhide. We both know that." Sunstreaker shuttered his optics, leaning in against Bob, while Scuttle chittered and patted him. "I don't belong anywhere."

"That ain't true."

"It is. You just don't want to admit it, because you feel guilty about the way things happened." Sunstreaker worked his intake and cycled a ventilation. "Sides is gone, 'Hide. And when he was here, I wasn't a very good brother. I wasn't a very good Autobot. I wasn't a very good friend. I guess I just wasn't good at anything."

"If this is your way of tryin' to get me not to worry, you're not good at that either. Why's this sound like a goodbye, Sunny?"

Sunstreaker managed a chuckle across the comm. "It is, and it isn't. The next time you see me, I might not be me. I don't know what's going to happen, but it's for the best, I think."

Ironhide cursed at him. "Damn it, kid. Where are ya? I'll come get ya."

"I wouldn't even know how to tell you where I am," Sunstreaker admitted. "And it doesn't matter. It's where I need to be, I think. It's where I might actually be good at something."

Sideswipe's gone. Ironhide didn't need him. Cybertron didn't need another traumatized soldier, wandering aimlessly through the streets. He'd have got back on board the Lost Light, if he could, but that option wasn't available to him.

He could lose himself in the Hive. Or he could shape the Hive to his image. He could be something to someone, to many someones.

He wouldn't have to be alone ever again.

"I'm gonna be okay," Sunstreaker said. Hoped. "I'll call you again when it's all done. Don't worry about me, and don't come looking. I'm fine."

"Ya don't sound fine," Ironhide growled, but he was important. He had a place in the greater scheme of Cybertron. He couldn't drop everything to wander the wilderness, searching for one lost Autobot, and not even a good one at that.

"I will be. Thanks for everything."

"Take care of yourself, kid. And if you need me, I got your back."

"Noted. Goodbye, Ironhide."

*Click.*

Sunstreaker cycled a ventilation. Two. He bowed his head, scratched behind Bob's audials, counted the tremors of Scuttle against his intake.

He made his choice.

"Come on, bug. Let's go home," Sunstreaker said. He stood and leaped down from the outcropping, picking his way through the uneven ground back to the tunnel entrance.

Hardshell was visible within the shadows of it, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. Whether he'd trailed Sunstreaker and been listening in, Sunstreaker didn't know. It didn't matter.

"Are you surprised?" Sunstreaker asked as he stepped under the ridge, and into the shadowed alcove.

Hardshell's visor glinted at him. "The searcher chose well."

Sunstreaker snorted and stepped into Hardshell's space, the Insecticon dropping his arms, kibble flicking to betray his surprise. Sunstreaker was tall enough now to cup his hand around the back of Hardshell's neck, pull him into range for a kiss, an aggressive one. He curved his other hand on Hardshell's hip, fingers sliding into a seam and stroking the cables beneath.

Hardshell rumbled against him. "My queen?"

"Not yet," Sunstreaker said. "It's time for the next upload."

Hardshell didn't pull back, but his head tilted with confusion. "What changed?"

"Nothing." Sunstreaker pressed himself along Hardshell's frame, the heat of the Insecticon like a soothing balm to a desperate itch. "Am I still your queen or not?"

Hardshell's frame shivered, armor ruffling in a long wave. "You will be." He cupped Sunstreaker's face, returning the kiss, though he was much gentler, reverent and caring.

This would need to be addressed, too. Sunstreaker had arrived here, confused and lost, had gone with the flow because he hadn't known what else to do. Well, things were different now.

He was going to be Queen. It was time he acted like it.

~

Down, down, down, they went, back into the depths of the Hive, far below the surface of Cybertron, where the weight of the planet felt comforting above him, rather than oppressive. The ambiance was better this time, lighter, celebratory. Sunstreaker rather felt he was floating deeper into a warm embrace, rather than fleeing the chill, anxious night.

"Welcome home, my queen. My queen, welcome home," Sharpshot said as Sunstreaker passed, while Kickback said nothing, watching Sunstreaker warily, as if disappointed but resigned.

Bob danced around Sunstreaker's feet, and only protested a little when Sunstreaker wouldn't let him enter the private chamber.

"Go play with your friends," Sunstreaker said, and coaxed Scuttle from his intake, resting the builder on Bob's back. "Take care of Scuttle."

Scuttle hunkered down. Bob turned in circles, as if trying to see the mini-bug on his back, but unable to get a good view. It was enough of a distraction for Sunstreaker to slip into the chamber, Hardshell in tow, without Bob trying to dart inside.

Expectation hung in the air, like a charged ion cloud. Sunstreaker's spark throbbed with anticipation. His valve pulsed with it, cycling eagerly, cycling into readiness.



"I wasn't running away," Sunstreaker said, now that he and Hardshell were alone, without obvious audials listening in. "I was getting perspective."

"It is not my place to question my queen's actions," Hardshell said, wary as he watched Sunstreaker move through the room, idly touching a few things -- and noting the new mirror, now set up in an alcove.

Sunstreaker snorted. "So you say." He sat on the berth and looked at Hardshell. "Bob led me here, but you've been the one laying down the offer. You knew I was broken. You've said as much. It was pretty manipulative, don't you think, to offer me this when I couldn't think straight."

"I only offered what I thought you needed," Hardshell said, but there was diplomacy in his voice. Ah, this was a tone Sunstreaker knew too well. He'd heard it from Prowl often enough.

Sunstreaker leaned back on his hands, parting his knees and thighs invitingly, and inwardly crowed when Hardshell's gaze dropped to his pelvis before lifting to his face again.

"I was at my weakest, and you took advantage of that, but then, I'd guess that's what you'd do for the Hive, isn't it?"

Hardshell's head tipped in an almost servile manner. "My duty is the Hive."

Sunstreaker shifted his weight and skimmed the palm of his free hand down his chassis, toward his array. "You walk around like you're a servant who only knows to bow, but that's not true, is it?" He flicked his glossa over his lips and cupped his valve, the panel snicking aside beneath his fingertips. "You're the power behind the throne."

Hardshell's antennae twitched. Bingo. Nail on the head.

He moved closer to the berth, gaze flicking toward Sunstreaker's busy hand, then back to his face. "Coding can control many things, but I am not bound to it. You are my queen, but I chose you."

Sunstreaker licked his lips. He traced the rim of his valve before dipping a single finger within, wetting it with his own lubricant. "You'd have killed me."

"If you'd proven unworthy."

The scent of his own arousal filled the air. Hardshell must have picked up on it, if the rev of his engine was any indication.

"Is that how your previous queen died?" Sunstreaker asked, even more certain there was more to the story than he'd first been told.

"No. It was a tunnel collapse."

"Yeah, and Starscream's my twin."

Sunstreaker snorted, but it didn't hold for long, not as he flicked his lubricant-damp fingers over his anterior node and a frisson of pleasure swept through his frame. He paused, gathered himself, and his train of thought.

He tilted his head. "I thought maybe Kickback had done it or had a hand in it, but now I think I was suspicious of the wrong member of my cadre."

Hardshell's silence spoke volumes. He watched Sunstreaker, a step closer now, near enough for

Sunstreaker to smell the heat of him, the desire wafting from him, but he said nothing. He wouldn't lie, but he wouldn't admit the truth either.

Sunstreaker smirked and held up his hand, lubricant sticky strings between his fingers. "You are the Queenmaker, but I'll bet you can also be the Queen-unmaker. If you suspected the Queen was no good for the Hive."

There was a beat before Hardshell moved close enough to touch, only to sink to his knees, as if bending before a throne. "I am a loyal servant," he said, voice subservient, but Sunstreaker didn't believe it for a second.

He frowned. "Pitslag." Sunstreaker pushed himself fully upright, which put him on even keel with Hardshell. "I don't want that. Be honest with me."

Hardshell rested his hands on Sunstreaker's knees, palm sliding upward in a caress. "I will serve a queen faithfully and loyally, if that queen is worthy of both," he rumbled, and his thumbs swept tantalizingly close to Sunstreaker's array.

Charge flashed hot down Sunstreaker's spinal strut. "And if not, you can always make another, right?"

"It's not so simple. My coding--"

Sunstreaker grabbed one of Hardshell's mandibular juts, thumb sliding along the length of it, and Hardshell went silent. "You and Sharpshot and Kickback are close, aren't you?"

"We three have served our Queen since the Hive's inception," Hardshell answered. A shiver ran through his frame, a flutter of his armor, his hands trembling where they cupped Sunstreaker's thighs before he seemed to master himself.

Was this what he'd been waiting for?

"That's what I thought," Sunstreaker murmured. It was all the answer he needed as well.

Hardshell might act the part, might play the servant. But he was as devoted to this Hive, to Sharpshot and Kickback, as Sunstreaker had been to Sideswipe. It wasn't because his coding told him to be, though that was certainly part of it.

Hardshell loved his Hive. He loved his cadre.

And if Sunstreaker could prove himself worthy of it, he'd love Sunstreaker as well.

He curled his fingers around both of Hardshell's mandibular spikes, drawing Hardshell close enough for a nuzzle, planting a kiss on the corner of Hardshell's mouth.

"Frag me," Sunstreaker said. "I want to be your queen." He rolled his hips into Hardshell's hold, his valve seeping lubricant, the scent of his arousal thick in the room. "If you want me, take me."

A low growl rose in Hardshell's intake. A harsher shudder rippled over his frame, and then he surged upward, lifting Sunstreaker as though he weighed nothing, pressing him down into the berth. Even with the changes, he was still larger, more massive, and Sunstreaker felt dominated by him.

Arousal pulsed hot and wanton through his sensor net.

Hardshell's visor burned. "You play games, Sunstreaker," he hissed.

"No more than you, deceiver. Manipulator." Sunstreaker bracketed his thighs around Hardshell's waist, hooked his ankles behind Hardshell. He lifted his chin, refusing to be cowed. "Am I to be your queen or not?"

A click preceded the hot, blunt pressure of Hardshell's spike against his valve, fully pressurized and dripping with pre-fluid. How long had he been restraining himself? How long had his coding been yelling at him to take his queen? As long as Sunstreaker's own fledgeling changes had been demanding he take his maker's spike?

Sunstreaker shuddered and spread his legs wider, canting his hips up, trying to match the perfect angle for Hardshell to take him.

"You are our queen," Hardshell said, but his words were like a vow, a promise, as he slid into Sunstreaker, slowly, achingly slow, tasting every sensor one by one. "We are your Hive. You are ours. We are yours."

Sunstreaker moaned, pulled Hardshell's face closer to his, felt the scrape of Hardshell's mandibular kibble against his armor, and shuddered with pleasure. "Mine," he agreed. "Yours."

Sunstreaker intended to prove worthy of that promise. He wouldn't be a queen they sought to escape. He'd protect them. He'd love them.

They'd be his.

And in return, he'd be theirs.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 8

The changes came more swiftly, after the first stage. More noticeable. Sunstreaker fell into recharge post-upload, and onlined with new growths, new adjustments. Sometimes, it was so subtle he almost didn't notice. Sometimes, they came with a lingering ache which kept him aberth, Hardshell never far from his side, offering him energon and coolant and sometimes calling the carers for him.

It was nice to lay in the berth and be spoiled. The carers were more like drones, and they scurried over his frame, cleaning and polishing, chittering to each other, and occasionally Scuttle would come out and pounce on one in a form of play.

Sunstreaker settled into his frame, and the changes, with an acceptance he hadn't felt before. Cybertron. The war. Sideswipe. Ironhide. It was part of a life that wasn't his anymore. Something he'd left behind, as if he was leaving 'Sunstreaker' behind as well. Or at least, the old version of himself.

He committed to being Queen.

His newfound devotion must have impressed Hardshell. Or relieved him. Their little discussion had cleared the air, and while Hardshell still acted subservient on occasion, it was only where there were witnesses. As if he had to keep up the facade around the lower-ranked Insecticons, while in private, he would purr Sunstreaker's designation, and allow himself to be more aggressive.

Becoming Queen, however, wasn't all interfacing and recharging and getting spoiled. There was a lot of work involved, or so Hardshell reminded him one morning, after Sunstreaker had woken oddly invigorated and without the ever-present need boiling in his abdomen.

"Reproducing," Sunstreaker guessed.

"Yes. That is one of your main responsibilities, but it's not the only one," Hardshell said. "You must also see to the needs of the Hive. You must guide us." He paused and admitted, "You might also speak with Kickback."

"He's on my list," Sunstreaker said, and begrudgingly rolled himself out of the languid comfort of the berth, Bob dancing around his heels, and Scuttle dropping down from the ceiling to land on his shoulder.

Scuttle hadn't gone back to work, despite Hardshell's disapproving looks. Sunstreaker liked the builder's company, and while he knew he could order Scuttle back to his duties, he preferred Scuttle right where he was.

The Queen wanted company.

"How about today?" Sunstreaker asked. "Show me where he works and the breeding grounds. Tell me how I'm supposed to, you know..." He gestured to his stomach, and this was the part that still unsettled him.

Pregnancy was not a thing for Cybertroninans. Carrying young within their frames was not done. They had the Well. They had the Allspark. They had the fields. They had the Matrix. They were

not like organics.

Trust the Insecticons to buck that basic fact.

“Breed?” Hardshell prompted with a little laugh. It amused him, Sunstreaker’s hang-ups, and Sunstreaker allowed it, because the more comfortable Hardshell was around him, the more likely he was to respect Sunstreaker, and the less likely Sunstreaker was to have an unfortunate accident.

“Kickback will probably explain it better, but I can start with the basics. Come.”

He’d learn his way around the Hive eventually, but for now, Sunstreaker still needed Hardshell to guide him. There were so many twisting and turning tunnels, and it was hard to stay oriented underground.

“Once you are fully integrated, your frame will start to produce the seedlings, but you’ll need a stud to fertilize them,” Hardshell explained as they walked, Sunstreaker more easily keeping pace, especially now that he was closer in size to the Insecticon. “Only a Queen can produce seedlings.”

Sunstreaker nodded. That much he could follow. “But there are a bunch of different kinds of Insecticons.” He blanched, thinking of tiny Scuttle. “Do I have to frag all of them?”

Hardshell laughed, and luckily, didn’t sound offended. “No, my queen. There are different subclasses of studs, each uniquely suited to the breeding of a specific class.” He gestured to Scuttle. “Those like the builders, the feeders, and the searchers. They can reproduce on their own.”

So the Hive wouldn’t die without a Queen, it would simply be reduced to drones. Perhaps that’s the mistake Shockwave had made with the Swarm. He hadn’t been able to get his hands on a Queen, and had only used the coding of the drone Insecticons.

“That leaves... what? Five subclasses?” Sunstreaker squinted, trying to count, but honestly, he still wasn’t familiar with the intricacies of the Hive. He had a lot to learn.

“Seven.”

“Primus.” Sunstreaker shivered.

Hardshell crooked him a smile. “You will only reproduce as needed, my queen. Some classes require more than the others.”

Still.

That was a lot of fragging.

“Okay,” Sunstreaker said. “So the studs fertilize my seedlings. Then what? I just lay around and my belly swells and then I... err... give birth?”

Hardshell laughed again. “You will not be birthing live young, or fully formed bitlets.” He grabbed Sunstreaker’s hand, tangling their fingers together. Sunstreaker’s were longer now, more elegant, with an extra knuckle, and capped with a burgeoning talon. “You will birth eggs which will be kept in the hatchery to be looked after by the nurses. They will reside in nests of energon where they will grow until they are ready to hatch on their own.”

Primus, that was complicated.

Sunstreaker frowned as he reviewed the process. His own body would produce these seedlings, pods probably. Studs would fertilize them. Sunstreaker would carry the seedlings for a bit, then birth them into a hatchery?

“No wonder you need a queen. This sounds complicated,” Sunstreaker said with a sigh. Though he was glad to hear his future didn’t entail a lifetime of lying in a bed, giving birth to batches and batches of eggs upon end.

It seemed like reproduction would be only part of his function. What a relief.

“Kickback can explain it better,” Hardshell admitted, and there was a warmth to his tone, a carefully hidden affection, as though he’d been taught to conceal that part of himself.

“If he’ll talk to me,” Sunstreaker murmured.

“He will. You are Queen.”

Sunstreaker wasn’t so sure.

~

The breeding grounds were apparently where Kickback could be found. The cavern for medical care was nearby, and it wasn’t far from the oilsprings. Sunstreaker remembered passing through them before, when the little pools had been empty, and the webbing had looked dry and dead.

Things were different now.

Builders -- Sunstreaker was getting better at telling the difference between the classes -- scurried all around the ceiling and the walls and the floors and the pools. They shored up cracks and cleaned. The whole breeding cavern had a warm, spicy scent to it. Organic, but metallic, too. Sunstreaker couldn’t name it.

Some of the pools had been filled with energon, though it was unlike any Sunstreaker had ever seen. It was thicker, more viscous, like a syrup. He paused by one, dipping his finger into it, and his sensors tingled. It was warm, like ambient frame temperature warm, and when he tasted it, something sweet exploded across his glossa.

“The feeders produce nutrients to enrich the fluid. That is what you taste.”

Sunstreaker looked up from his crouch. He hadn’t heard Kickback approach, and he’d gotten so used to the ambient noise of Insecticons around him, he hadn’t detected Kickback either. He should have. Paying attention, he could hear the slightly discordant presence of one of his Hivemembers, not at all pleased to see his queen.

“Kind of jealous of the bitlets,” Sunstreaker said as he pushed to his feet, pleased to find he was nearly on par with Kickback now. Of the cadre, Hardshell was the largest, and Sharpshot the smallest. “It’s pretty tasty.”

Kickback's winglets twitched. "You look more like a queen. I approve," he said.

"Kickback," Hardshell's voice had warning in it.

Sunstreaker shot him a look, shook his head, before he returned his attention to Kickback. "Do you actually? Haven't you had your fill of queens?"

Kickback's visor flared before he could tamp it down. He took a step back, folding his arms at the base of his back. "My coding demands I serve a queen."

"Not what I asked, but an answer in itself." Sunstreaker looked around the cavern, idly stroking Scuttle while Bob chirruped and went bounding after a cluster of nurse drones, who squawked and scattered. "I don't really know how it works, but I still think the pools look good. The eggs will be comfortable here."

Kickback shifted. "They are a pittance compared to the glory they used to be, but they will suffice." He paused, and there was a flicker across his face, something in the way the light of his visor shifted, as he looked Sunstreaker up and down. "You'll enter the final stage soon. When shall I expect a summons?"

Sunstreaker cycled his optics. "Summons?"

Hardshell folded his arms. "It's traditional that the cadre accompany the queen on her final ascension to the throne."

"Why?"

"To cement the bonds with the cadre," Kickback said, but if his distaste grew anymore, it would poison Sunstreaker's own spark.

Ugh. How could the previous queen stand it? How could they take Kickback to berth while feeling this noxious emotion?

Sunstreaker swept his hand over his head and petted Scuttle again, a nervous habit he was developing. "Do you want an invitation to my berth?"

"It is tradition," Kickback said, and that nauseating burst of do-not-want nearly made Sunstreaker retch. His tanks churned, and he had to pause, cycle several ventilations, for the wave of disgust to pass.

He shook his head. "That's not what I asked. I want to know if you, Kickback, have any interest in coming to berth with me and fragging me. Or letting me frag you."

Kickback hesitated. He glanced at Hardshell, who must have given some kind of nod of approval before he looked back at Sunstreaker. He bowed his head, shoulders slumping, and misery poured off him in waves. "No, my queen."

Oh, thank Primus.

"Then no, I don't want you in my berth," Sunstreaker said, and Kickback jerked as if struck, head lifting, visor flaring. "I only want mechs who want to be there. If you ever change your mind, the

invitation is open, but I'm never going to order you there. Understand?"

"He's serious, Kickback," Hardshell said, and his voice had a queer note to it, like amusement fought with relief fought with pity for his fellow cadre-mate. "If you don't want to, you don't have to. You can say 'no'."

Kickback's wings flicked harder. "And I'll lose my position, no doubt. Be cast into the wilds while you seek a replacement, someone more amenable." He sneered and squared his shoulders. "I will not surrender this. I will do what I must to ensure I keep it."

"I want you exactly where you are," Sunstreaker said, and made a broad gesture to the cavern at large. "Hardshell wants you here, and I'm not stupid. I'm going to be queen of a hive, and I want what's best for my hive. I don't need to force anyone into my berth. And I wish I could rip out the spark of the last queen who did that to you."

Hardshell made a noise behind him, but Sunstreaker ignored it.

Kickback stared at him, and Sunstreaker knew it was going to take more than a single conversation to earn Kickback's trust, but this was a start. It was better than nothing.

"If you summon me, I will come," Kickback said, slowly, carefully, his wings fluttering into a low, droning hum behind me. "But if you wait... I may come to you yet."

Sunstreaker nodded. Coding was such a terrible thing sometimes. Kickback couldn't bring himself to definitively refuse Sunstreaker, but if Sunstreaker never forced him to make the choice, he wouldn't have to.

"You may never invite yourself to my berth, and I would accept that, too," Sunstreaker said. He took a step back, into Hardshell's reach, leaning more on the warmth and undercurrents of desire he could sense in Hardshell, and away from the pain and disgust still leaking out of Kickback.

"Very well." Kickback cycled an audible ventilation. "Is there anything I can do for you at the moment, my queen?"

Sunstreaker shook his head. "No, I'm just taking a tour, trying to familiarize myself with this place and the, uh, reproductive process. I'll send Hardshell if I have any questions."

Hardshell was not meant to be used in such a manner, but for Kickback, Sunstreaker felt it necessary. Any other summons might be misconstrued, whereas Hardshell in his position of authority could explain properly without Kickback thinking Sunstreaker had something nefarious in mind.

"Very well." Kickback bowed, more deeply than before, something more genuine in the dip of his head, the flicker of his wings. "You know where I can be found. Good day, my queen."

"Thank you, Kickback."

Sunstreaker turned to leave so Kickback wouldn't feel obligated, falling into step beside Hardshell. He waited to speak until they were out of the birthing grounds. He wasn't sure where Hardshell led him, save that it wasn't back to his personal quarters.

The tunnels led away from the breeding grounds, at a slight incline, but not enough to suggest they



were going to the surface. The air was less moist here, and there were fewer builders scurrying around the ceilings. These corridors felt older, like perhaps they were part of the original Hive, before they'd had to move.

"I think I'm making progress with Kickback," Sunstreaker said, to fill the quiet.

"Time will tell," Hardshell replied. "I have been speaking with him, and I know Sharpshot has as well. We both speak in your favor."

Sharpshot.

Sunstreaker hadn't spent much time with the third member of the cadre. He would need to rectify that. Especially if tradition dictated his cadre join him for the final transformation. An invitation would need to be extended, whether or not Sharpshot accepted it, though he'd been more accepting of Sunstreaker's ascension from the beginning. He put a lot of faith in Bob.

Then again, if the searchers fell under his purview, no wonder Sharpshot trusted in Bob's abilities and insight.

Though, if Hardshell were to be believed, their searchers had failed twice before. Perhaps Sharpshot felt the sting of that failure.

"I should talk to Sharpshot," Sunstreaker said. "I don't want him to think I'm ignoring him or neglecting him."

Hardshell rested a hand at the base of Sunstreaker's spine, the warmth of his touch flowing through Sunstreaker. "He knows your spark. And he knows you are in the midst of the most important part of your assimilation."

"That's reassuring." Sunstreaker reached up to pet Scuttle, who chittered and rubbed against his intake, radiating happiness. "Where are we going now?"

"I thought I might take you to the soldier barracks, that you might see the army at your disposal, before the next heat strikes."

"You're going to show me around the entire Hive at some point, aren't you?"

Hardshell laughed and rubbed the base of his back, his fingers leaving trails of static in their wake. It felt a lot like a lover might, and Sunstreaker had to admit, it was intoxicating.

"Yes, my queen. Eventually, you will know your Hive even better than I do."

"I doubt that, but I appreciate your faith in me."

~

Sharpshot came to him first.

Sunstreaker was delighted about that, or at least he would have been, if Sharpshot hadn't come to

call when Hardshell was knot-deep in Sunstreaker, post-overload, while they waited for his knot to depressurize. Usually, Sunstreaker would be in recharge, but every change brought increased stamina, and now, he was online, sprawled on Hardshell's chassis, listening to Hardshell's engine purr.

His valve twitch-twitched with lingering pleasure, and if Hardshell kept petting him the way he was, Sunstreaker suspected he'd get another overload out of it. It was addicting, the kind of ecstasy Hardshell brought him. He couldn't get enough.

His door swung open.

Sunstreaker went from relaxed repose, to alert in an instant. He sat up, shifting Hardshell within him, the knot rubbing against a node cluster and making him shudder, even as he groped for a blaster that was no longer in his thigh compartment.

Hardshell growled and went tense, but it lasted only a moment before his hand curved around Sunstreaker's nearest thigh with a gentle squeeze.

"Peace, my queen. It is Sharpshot," Hardshell said, but there was annoyance in his tone as much as relief.

Sure enough, when Sunstreaker glanced over his shoulder, Sharpshot stood just within the doorway, hands clasped behind his back, his high-arched antennae spitting a few lone sparks.

"I apologize for interrupting. Interrupt I shouldn't have," Sharpshot said with a deep, deep bow. His armor clamped tight, as though he expected to be punished.

Of all the things Sunstreaker felt in the moment, shame was the least of it. Hardshell remained knotted within him, and pleasure was a low-buzz in his sensornet, but oddly, Sharpshot's arrival didn't feel like an intrusion. Perhaps his coding already recognized Sharpshot as one of his cadre, someone who belonged around Sunstreaker in such a weakened state.

"You're always welcome in my quarters, Sharpshot," Sunstreaker said, cutting off what was likely to be a chastisement on Hardshell's part. "Is this an emergency?"

"No." Sharpshot's gaze flicked around, from Hardshell to Sunstreaker to the berth and back again, his armor fluttering around his substructure. "We should talk. Talk about my place. My place with my queen."

Hardshell cupped Sunstreaker's aft, shifting beneath him, and Sunstreaker shivered as the knot softened further, enough Hardshell could slip out if he wanted. His thumbs rubbed over Sunstreaker's pelvic arch, keeping him in place. Feeling possessive perhaps?

Sunstreaker rested a hand on Hardshell's abdomen with a little pat. "Come over here, Sharpshot. I don't want to have to talk to you over my shoulder."

"Yes, my queen, my queen." Sharpshot dipped his head in a bow and approached, pausing beside the berth where he could see both Hardshell and Sunstreaker -- and what they were currently in the middle of.

Sunstreaker could move if he wanted.

He opted to stay where he was, the scent of interfacing thick in the air, the heat of their exertions surrounding them.

“The final stage will be soon. Soon you will be our queen,” Sharpshot said as he assessed Sunstreaker’s frame in a quick glance.

Sunstreaker skated both of his palms over Hardshell’s abdomen, while he shifted his attention to Sharpshot. “I already know Kickback won’t be here for the last upload. Dare I ask or will you feel compelled to whether you want to or not?”

Sharpshot’s mouth opened. Closed. He visibly hesitated, glancing at Hardshell, and Sunstreaker frowned.

“Don’t look to him for an answer, look to me,” Sunstreaker snapped, and then cycled his optics because.

Whoa.

Where had that come from?

Sharpshot snapped to attention, his antennae giving another array of sparks. “I am obedient, obediently loyal, loyal to my queen,” he said, and Sunstreaker inwardly cursed at himself.

Frag, frag, frag. He needed to get these queenly instincts under control before they controlled him. He didn’t want to be another tyrant.

Damn it.

Sunstreaker cycled a ventilation and patted Hardshell’s belly, gaining his attention. “Help me up. As fun as this is, I can’t have this conversation with your spike in me.”

“Too much temptation, my queen?” Hardshell said, and maybe it was meant to be a tease, or maybe he was trying to remind Sharpshot where they stood in the hierarchy.

Maybe Sunstreaker didn’t care either way.

He tossed Hardshell a wry grin. “You could put it that way.”

Hardshell laughed and lifted Sunstreaker with ease, setting him comfortably on the berth. He leaned in for a kiss, nuzzling their faces. “I’ll fetch a cloth to clean you. I shall return.”

“Do.”

Hardshell stole another kiss before he walked away, briefly squeezing Sharpshot’s shoulder as they passed. Something wordless passed between them, but whatever it was, seemed to take the stiffness out of Sharpshot’s posture, and the worry from his optics.

Sunstreaker sat on the edge of the berth, valve still bared and swollen from the most recent upload, and didn’t feel an ounce of shame.

“I know your coding forces a certain obedience,” Sunstreaker said to gain Sharpshot’s attention. “I know your previous queen had expectations. I’m not like them. I won’t be like them. And I don’t

want anyone in my berth who doesn't want to be there."

Sharpshot nodded, his antennae exchanging sparks. "I live to serve, serve my queen," he said, but there was uncertainty in his tone, as if he wasn't sure what Sunstreaker wanted to hear.

Damn, but it was going to be aggravating to make them understand this.

"I will never tell you to come to my berth," Sunstreaker said, and tried to think about how else to phrase this. Prowl would have been good at it. He'd always been better with words. "I'll never ask you either. But you're welcome to it whenever you want."

Sharpshot lowered himself to one knee, pressing a hand to his chassis, over where Sunstreaker imagined was the core of him. His spark. Did Insecticons have sparks? There were partially organic, partially mechanical. He'd never thought to ask what powered them.

A question for another day.

"I would be honored. Honored to serve. Serve my queen," Sharpshot said, and he rested a hand on Sunstreaker's thigh, warm and gentle. "Serve by choice. Choice to love. Love to embrace. Embrace my queen."

Sunstreaker covered Sharpshot's hand with his and cupped Sharpshot's face, drawing him close enough to feel Sharpshot's ex-vents tickle him. "You approve of me?"

"Yes." A single word, without the odd echo Sharpshot usually used.

Sunstreaker kissed him, and the vibrations of Sharpshot's hum against his lips sent a thrill of pleasure across his sensornet. Sharpshot tasted of energon, as though he'd recently refueled, and his denta were blunter than Hardshell's, though far more dangerous than the average Cybertronian.

He kissed like he wanted to savor, more servile than Hardshell's aggressive, claiming, biting kisses. Sunstreaker approved. He moaned into the kiss, deepening it, letting their glossa tangle. He dragged his fingers over Sharpshot's antennae, felt their charge kiss his fingertips, and Sharpshot shudder beneath him.

Yes, there was desire here. Genuine desire.

Sunstreaker nipped Sharpshot's bottom lip as he drew back from the kiss, his valve twitching in an attempt to reignite. "Your interest is real, I see."

"I am delighted to share, share in pleasure," Sharpshot murmured and his optics were bright crimson, his armor fluffing around his substructure. "Pleasure my queen."

Sunstreaker grinned and slipped a leg between Sharpshot's thighs, nudging his foot at the apex of them, right over his interface array. "And get pleasure for yourself right? Are you a valve or a spike mech?"

Sharpshot loosed a staticky groan. "Either. Both. Valve."

Sunstreaker hummed and fondled Sharpshot's antennae again, his mouth laving a hot, wet line around the sharp cut of Sharpshot's jaw. "I look forward to it then. I'm eager to try out my new spike, and if you're willing, I'd love to watch you squirm on it."

A strangled sound of pure want freed itself from Sharpshot's intake. His hands tightened on Sunstreaker's knees, and the smell of charged ions filled the room as arcs of static danced between his antennae.

"May I taste, taste my queen?" Sharpshot asked and his hands curled around Sunstreaker's knees, nudging them apart, fitting himself between them, his intent evident.

Sunstreaker groaned, his valve throbbing with anticipation. "Go right ahead."

Sharpshot rumbled, that's the only way to describe the sound. He tugged Sunstreaker closer to him with a show of strength, before his mouth fell over Sunstreaker's valve, glossa immediately sweeping over his rim, lapping up the mix of transfluid and lubricant sticky on his valve.

*Primus.*

Sunstreaker's back arched. He braced himself on the berth, thighs trembling, as Sharpshot pushed his legs wider, and pushed his glossa deeper, lapping into Sunstreaker's valve. He suckled on Sunstreaker's anterior node, each suck pulling a sharp throb of pleasure, until Sunstreaker's arms wobbled and down he went.

Sharpshot licked into him with a single-minded intensity, and Sunstreaker's awareness went white-hot. He writhed on the berth, engine revving, gasping for a vent, fisting the berth covers and rending them with his new talons, still unused to their sharpness.

Sharpshot sucked and sucked and sucked until Sunstreaker's backstrut arched and he overloaded with a keen, knees pushing against Sharpshot's grip, his valve pulsing new dribbles of lubricant, which Sharpshot eagerly lapped away. Sunstreaker collapsed into the berth, fans spinning wildly, satisfaction pulsing through his frame.

He pawed at Sharpshot, tried to pull him in for a kiss and succeeded, tasting himself on Sharpshot's lips.

"You now," he said, groping for Sharpshot's panel, which felt scorching hot to his fingertips. "How can your queen serve you, Sharpshot? What do you want from me?"

Sharpshot leaned over him, bucking into Sunstreaker's palm, one knee on the bed. "Anything," he said. "Anything."

"Then open," Sunstreaker demanded, and Sharpshot's panels immediately sprung aside, valve dripping, spike seeping pre-fluid, pressurizing hot and full into Sunstreaker's fingers.

Sharpshot's other knee landed on the berth, until he straddled Sunstreaker's thighs, his spike pushing into the tunnel of Sunstreaker's fist. He planted his hands to either side of Sunstreaker's shoulders, freeing Sunstreaker's other hand to slip between Sharpshot's thighs, seeking the hot slick of his valve.

"You're ready for me," Sunstreaker purred as he traced the rim of Sharpshot's valve -- oval rather than circular, he noticed, with a carpet of nubs along the lining. His lubricant was hotter, stickier, and his anterior nub was a large button to Sunstreaker's thumb. "Take your pleasure, Sharpshot. Let your queen show you how he serves."

Sharpshot keened and rutted against his hands, rocking into the tunnel of Sunstreaker's fists, grinding down on one, then two, then three fingers he fit up inside the Insecticon, curving them to seek out sensory nodes, while his thumb relentlessly circled Sharpshot's nub.

"Overload for me, Sharpshot," Sunstreaker urged as he stroked Sharpshot's spike, squeezing and pulling on the thick unit, which was slimmer than Hardshell's, but far more nubbed and tapered. "Spill all over me."

Sharpshot made a sound that wasn't Cybertronian, it wasn't speech. It was pure Insecticon. An ululating chitter and rasp that spilled out of his intake and filled the air. He rutted hard against Sunstreaker's hands, hips moving in sharp, desperate intervals, until charge erupted from his antennae, and he overloaded, spike spurting over Sunstreaker's fist, valve soaking Sunstreaker's fingers.

Sunstreaker worked him gently, stroking him through the overload, extending the pleasure as long as he could. "Perfect," he murmured. "Thank you."

A raspy chuckle rose from Sharpshot. "I should thank, thank my queen," he said, and shifted to the side, with a tired slump onto the open space of the berth. Little nips of charge danced between his antennae. "Truly you know, know how to serve."

"Glad my berth skills are acceptable." Sunstreaker laughed.

"I see I missed the introduction." Hardshell's voice spilled into the room, but it was warm, affectionate, and a touch disappointed.

Bah. He would be able to see it first hand soon enough, if Sharpshot returned for the final stage at any least.

Sharpshot, however, went a little still. Sunstreaker noticed his apprehension, both in the clamp of his armor, and the way his awareness of Sharpshot went worried and tense.

Sunstreaker grasped the nearest bit of Sharpshot he could reach -- his shoulder -- and squeezed. "You took too long in getting a cloth. It's not my fault you missed the show." He rolled over, though it took some effort, and snuggled into Sharpshot's frame. "Clean me later. The upload is kicking in."

He slid his arm around Sharpshot's waist, his fingers splaying over Sharpshot's abdomen, and hooked his chin over Sharpshot's shoulder, staring at Hardshell over the rise of Sharpshot's frame. He still wasn't sure how the hierarchy worked here, and he wouldn't call it fear that Sharpshot had of Hardshell. It was something else.

"It seems you have all the company you need, my queen," Hardshell said, and yeah, that was definitely jealousy in his tone, enough to make Sharpshot's anxiety linger, rather than be soothed by Sunstreaker's presence.

Sunstreaker offlined his optics. "And if I'm not mistaken, this berth has always been big enough for myself and my cadre. You're welcome to join us."

"Traditionally, you are mine alone until you are finally made," Hardshell said, a grumble if Sunstreaker had words for it, but he slipped onto the berth behind Sunstreaker, possessive in the way he curled against Sunstreaker's back.

Ah, that explained both the jealousy and Sharpshot's agitation.

"Some traditions are meant to be broken," Sunstreaker murmured as he grabbed Hardshell's hand where it was slung over him, and brought it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to the talontips.

"You have quite the hunger, my queen," Hardshell purred into his audial, and the vibrations of it buzzed down Sunstreaker's spinal strut. "That's good. You will breed well."

"Our queen is strong. Strong and fair," Sharpshot said, and at last he relaxed in Sunstreaker's arms, Sunstreaker's sense of him shifting to relief and satisfaction. "Serve us well."

"Yes, he will." Hardshell nuzzled the back of Sunstreaker's head. "Rest, my queen. We will guard your sleep."

Sunstreaker relaxed between them, safe in their arms.

He slept.

\*\*\*

## Chapter 9

Sunstreaker woke and a scream caught in his intake.

His armor was on fire, his sensornet burned, and he swore his fluids boiled in his lines. Most of the heat centered on his groin, but his entire frame was a thing of molten agony.

Everything hurt. His struts. His joints. His limbs.

His tank clenched with hunger. He ripped the berth sheets to threads -- full talons now rather than the half-blunt nubs they'd been before. His spike ached, fully pressurized, beading at the tip, and Sunstreaker spread his legs without thinking, his valve swollen and dripping and hungry.

"What... the frag?" he gasped, peeling his optical shutters up, the room around him a hazy smear of color and shapes.

"You're entering the final stage."

Sunstreaker oriented toward the voice, and his sense of awareness identified Kickback beside him, reaching for him. He cupped Sunstreaker's head, held an energon cube to his lips. "Drink."

He obeyed, relief coursing through his system as the cool energon slid over his hot glossa. He felt parched, and starving. He drained the energon dry, and protested when Kickback pulled it away.

"More will only make you ill," Kickback said, and he turned Sunstreaker's face toward him, an odd gentleness in the way he touched Sunstreaker. "He's ascending even quicker than I anticipated."

"Give him to me." Hardshell's voice peeked through the confusion.

Sunstreaker tried to turn, but he felt weak. Pliant. All save for the burning need in his groin, between his legs, sprouting from his pelvis. "H-Hardshell."

"I'm here, my queen." A hand on his thigh, and Sunstreaker obediently parted his legs, eager for a touch on his throbbing valve. "Sharpshot, will you stay?"

"I will remain. Remain for my queen."

"Kickback?"

"I will not participate, but I will monitor."

Sunstreaker whimpered. Why weren't they touching him? He reached for someone, trying to draw them closer, and hands circled around his wrists, holding them in place. Their touch was a simultaneous relief and a torment. The need burned hotter. The smears of color and shape blurred further. Everything was dizzy and loud and hot, like being overcharged on the strongest high grade.

Sunstreaker writhed, the smell of his arousal thick on the air. The berth beneath his aft was soaked with lubricant. His valve ached, and his spike throbbed, and it hurt, couldn't they see it hurt?

It was Hardshell who had his wrists. It was Sharpshot who touched his thighs. Neither of them offered him relief.

Sunstreaker growled. "Take me!"



"Yes, my queen," Sharpshot purred, and he crawled up Sunstreaker's frame, straddling his hips, leaning down for a nuzzle.

Sunstreaker's spike rubbed along the inside of his thighs, and Sunstreaker shuddered, his spikehead leaving a streak of fluid behind. Sharpshot gripped him, and then Sunstreaker's world view shifted, leaving him spinning dizzily, gasping to find his equilibrium.

He looked down at Sharpshot, his hips nestled between Sharpshot's thighs. Sharpshot's hands scrubbed along his frame.

"I am yours, yours to have," Sharpshot said as he rolled upward, and his valve caught Sunstreaker's spike.

Sunstreaker thrust blindly, desperately, and moaned when he found Sharpshot's valve and buried himself on the second push. Pleasure zapped up his spinal strut, relief chasing its heels. He pressed his forehead to Sharpshot's clavicular strut, grinding deep as Sharpshot shivered beneath him, his valve impossibly hot, impossibly wet, cycling to drag him deeper.

It felt impossibly good. It was utter relief. There was a part of Sunstreaker made of rationality, but it dissolved under the influence of instinct.

Take. Please. *Claim.*

He rutted into Sharpshot like an organic beast, and Sharpshot writhed beneath him, hands roaming over Sunstreaker's armor, keening loudly. His valve rippled and clenched around Sunstreaker's spike as if trying to pull him deeper.

Then heat pressed against his back, draped across him, bore him down against Sharpshot. He knew it was Hardshell without looking, knew the grip of Hardshell's hands on his hips, the press of Hardshell's spike against his inner thighs.

"One last time, my queen," Hardshell rumbled, and his voice was dark and thick with promise, heavy with lust.

Sunstreaker moaned. "Do it," he demanded, and his vocals echoed with command, with consent, with approval, with everything he needed it to be in order for Hardshell to slide into him, fill him to the brim.

His world swirled with color. Pleasure. Sound. Sensation.

Sharpshot beneath him. Hardshell above him. Spike swelling in his valve, his own grinding into Sharpshot's, tasting the oddly placed sensor nodes.

The heat tried to swallow him. Rather than fight it, Sunstreaker gave into it. The inferno blazed through his frame, swept through his sensor net, through his lines. It crackled along his struts and took up residence in his spark, which pulsed a new rhythm to him, an unfamiliar one. Deep, throbbing beats. A new song.

*Mine.*

*Yours.*

*Ours.*

They weren't spoken aloud, but Sunstreaker heard them nonetheless. Invisible chains fell away.

The last barrier shattered.

It was pain, but it wasn't.

Sunstreaker shattered, and felt himself fracture into pieces, somewhere in the gasping, the moaning, the clatter of armor, the slick glide of lubricant and interface arrays. The pain picked him up, swallowed him whole, battered him on a shore, passed him through fire.

It threw him out on the other side, threw him into ecstasy, into screaming pleasure. He slammed into his frame, fully changed, and it felt like his, no longer an awkward in-between. He was taller, heavier, stronger.

All around him, voices rose up. Not audibly. Not aloud. But he heard them. Felt them. In his spark. As if the entire Hive, as one, had felt his ascension.

Yes. His ascension.

He was Sunstreaker alone no longer.

He was More.

He was Queen.

\*\*\*

## Epilogue

Sunstreaker reclined on the outcropping, soaking in the rays of the current sun. He wasn't sure how long Cybertron would be tethered to this star, but until it broke free of the gravitational pull, he intended to enjoy the warmth it offered.

It was nice to have cycles again, even if he didn't register them below ground.

*“Chirr?”*

Scuttle turned in a circle on his belly, getting comfortable.

Sunstreaker grinned and stroked a finger along the builder's back. “Maybe I should see about getting some heat lamps for you, hmm? You seem to like the heat.”

*“Chirret!”*

Nearby, Bob chased a turborabbit fruitlessly. It was smaller than him. Faster, too. But Bob enjoyed the chase, enjoyed being able to hunt and stretch his legs. He didn't much leave Sunstreaker's side, which meant he didn't get out as often as he used to.

Sunstreaker would have to come to the surface a bit more frequently.

*“He comes, Queen!”*

Sunstreaker shifted Scuttle to his shoulder and sat up, dangling his legs over the edge of the outcropping, which gave him a perfect panoramic view of the landscape. Hardshell had insisted, and while Sunstreaker was Queen, he often deferred to his first in matters of safety.

Sunstreaker crossed one knee over the other and watched Ironhide approach, the red mech carefully picking his way over the cragged land. It would have been easier if he were designed for it, but Ironhide was a wheeled mech and ground based. He didn't have the natural agility of an Insecticon.

“Primus, Sunny. Ya sure did pick a slaghole to make a home,” Ironhide grumbled, but it was before he looked up, before he saw Sunstreaker. He nearly missed a step when he did, and he hurried to catch his balance. “What the--”

“I don't actually live here, you know,” Sunstreaker said with a faint wave of his hand. “The Hive is belowground. It's much nicer than this.”

Ironhide gaped at him. He squinted. “Is that really you?”

“Mostly.” Sunstreaker lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “Where it counts.” He glanced past Ironhide, scanned the horizon, but saw nothing to indicate more mechs were coming. His scouts reported the same. “You actually came alone. Thanks for that.”

“Well, you told me to, and I know how tetchy ya get.” Ironhide eyed the cliff where Sunstreaker perched, but he'd chosen this one specifically because it couldn't be scaled by a ground-based Cybertronian.

They would have to speak with this distance between them -- Hardshell insisted.

“What the frag happened to ya, kid?” Ironhide asked, the moment he must have realized there was

no getting closer.

Sunstreaker felt Bob's arrival before the bug skidded to a stop at his side, and chirped happily down at Ironhide. Sunstreaker scratched him behind the audials, and Bob flopped down beside Sunstreaker, aft wiggling.

"I found somewhere to belong," Sunstreaker said. "I didn't tell you to come here because I needed saving. I wanted you to know that I'm fine. I'm safe. You don't have to worry anymore."

"Not worry?" Ironhide spluttered, and he made big gestures with his hands, as if to point to the obvious changes in Sunstreaker's frame. "I don't even recognize ya. What happened?"

Sunstreaker chuckled. "That's partly why I wanted you to come here. Who's in charge of Cybertron now?"

Ironhide's mouth opened, closed, opened again. "Starscream, still, for the most part. He ain't doin' half a bad job at it, but maybe that's cause Windblade's helpin' him."

Starscream.

Well, Sunstreaker's not the mech he used to be. He's stronger now. Smarter. He won't be manipulated. He could handle Starscream.

"I'll want to talk to him eventually. One leader to another." Sunstreaker scratched behind Bob's audials again, and the bug purred happily. "My Hive is no danger to anyone, and I want to ensure we are not attacked."

"Your... Hive?" Ironhide glanced at Bob and back again, his hand squeezing the back of his neck. "You one of them now?"

Sunstreaker smiled, and even from this distance, surely Ironhide could see his sharpened denta, his fangs. "Better," he said. "I'm their Queen."

*Chirr!* Scuttle scampered from one shoulder to the other, tucking himself against Sunstreaker's clavicle with a nuzzle.

Ironhide sighed. "And this is what you want?"

"I'm happy. I'm content. Yes. It's what I want."

Sunstreaker paused, turning his awareness inward. Something stirred, something that filled the Hive with great joy, celebration rippling through every one of his children in a warm wave.

*It's time.*

Sunstreaker smiled. He knew exactly what they meant.

He looked down at Ironhide. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but there is something that needs my attention." He climbed to his feet, and heard Ironhide's sharp intake -- standing, he looked even more alien, and even less Cybertronian. "Let Starscream know I'll contact him for a meeting. And if you ever have need of me, well...." He gestured to the land around him. "You can come here. I will know."

Ironhide glanced around, shifting as though uneasy. "Are ya sure you're happy, Sunny? Is this really a good ending for you?"

"No." Sunstreaker stroked a finger under Scuttle's chin, who purred at nuzzled him. "It's a good beginning."

Ironhide's shoulders slumped. "Alright. I'll pass on the message, but if ya ever want to come back, I'll welcome ya. You have a home with me."

Sunstreaker's spark fluttered with warmth. "Thank you for the offer, Ironhide. You're one of the good ones." He dipped his head in a farewell gesture and turned to go, calling to Bob with a click of his glossa.

Bob yipped down at Ironhide as if offering a goodbye of his own.

"Yeah. See ya later, bug," Ironhide said.

Bob bounded back to Sunstreaker's side, antennae happily twitching.

"Awful proud of yourself, aren't you?" Sunstreaker murmured with a glance down at the Insecticon he'd rescued, and who'd become the very best friend a mech could ask for. "You found me. You brought me here. This is thanks to you, you know."

Bob scrubbed against Sunstreaker's legs, which would have thrown him off balance before his transformation. Satisfaction wafted from him in waves.

Sunstreaker chuckled.

He descended the backside of the outcropping, the sharply angled path treacherous to anyone who didn't have an Insecticon's grace. The tunnel entrance to the Hive was hidden in a rocky crag, overshadowed by a sharp jut, and there Hardshell waited, just outside, arms crossed. He'd conceded to wait by the entrance, rather than loom over Sunstreaker's shoulder.

Sunstreaker spread his hands as if to say 'I told you so', and stepped into Hardshell's embrace, cupping a hand around the back of his first's head. He pressed their foreheads together, humming deep in his chassis.

"Is it done?" Hardshell asked.

"It is." Sunstreaker rubbed his cheek against Hardshell's. "Don't be jealous. Ironhide is not important to me the way that you are."

"I am not jealous. I'm concerned for your welfare."

"Mm." Sunstreaker pulled back and stepped past Hardshell, into the dim of the tunnel, which seemed to exhale relief around him. Sometimes, he thought the Hive itself was alive, as if the Insecticon presence had seeped into the unliving stone and metal. "Come. The first batch is emerging."

Hardshell fell into step beside him, Bob trotting along in their wake. "I know. Sharpshot and Kickback are already there."

"Good."

"Do you think the surface mechs will be willing to deal fairly with you?" Hardshell asked.

Sunstreaker hummed as he considered it. "I've had dealings with Starscream before. He's manipulative and clever, but if he's held leadership of Cybertron for this long, perhaps he can be

reasoned with. Ironhide seems to think so."

"And if not, we aren't without our defenses."

"Yes, but I'd like to avoid bloodshed if at all possible. I don't want to lose a single one of mine to war," Sunstreaker said.

He was tired of war.

"It is one of the reasons you are much beloved, my queen."

It was a new experience, to be loved like this, but an experience Sunstreaker never wanted to abandon. He wanted to protect the Hive as much as it wanted to protect their queen, and their loyalty to each other was boundless.

Down, down, down they went, all the way to the nesting grounds, where it was the warmest, and the most humid, where webbing coated the walls to hold in moisture, and hung from the ceiling in gauzy drapes. Nurse drones skittered about, underfoot, but with a second sense for staying out of the way.

Sharpshot and Kickback waited for them around one of many cradles, Kickback solemn but Sharpshot with a wide, excited grin.

"They are hatching, my queen," Kickback said as Sunstreaker moved closer to the cradle, peering in at the large eggs nestled among a pool of bright energon and soft webbing, meant to mimic cloth. There were a half-dozen eggs within -- soldier eggs, as they were the first Sunstreaker had taken charge for.

The six eggs wobbled around in their nooks, tessellated plates of armor shifting and twitching, though they'd yet to slide apart.

"They will be strong," Sharpshot said. "Strong and beautiful. Beautiful like our queen."

"I certainly hope so," Sunstreaker said. He rested his hand on his abdomen, where a batch of medics rested within his gestational chamber, until they were ready to be birthed into the cradle. Smaller than the soldiers, he currently carried a full dozen.

Their implantation had been the work of a stud named Patchwing, and he'd been a generous lover, keen on teasing his queen as much as he'd been keen on fertilizing the seedlets.

Highjump had spawned the soldiers preparing to hatch, and while he'd been successful, Sunstreaker would never let Highjump stud again. He hadn't told Hardshell, but Highjump had been unnecessarily rough, and treated the fertilization process like an unwelcome task, rather than the gift it was.

If Hardshell knew, he would have Highjump killed. Sunstreaker preferred to demote the stud. He spawned soldiers, so a soldier he would become. He would serve the Hive much better in that regard, and Sunstreaker had other studs to choose from, ones more eager for the task at hand.

Sunstreaker was still learning.

He was Queen, but none of it came to him innately. He had guidance from his cadre, and they helped, but there was much only time and trial would teach him.

Fortunately, he had plenty of time to experiment. And plenty of mercy to offer.

The eggs twitched again.

Sunstreaker knelt beside the cradle, his hands on the edge. The eggs were the size of his head, perhaps a touch smaller. When unfurled, they would be the size of the feeders, but they would grow with time. They would become fierce and proud warriors, ready to defend their Hive.

They were Sunstreaker's first hatchlings.

"The first of our Queen's offspring. They will be cherished for that alone," Hardshell murmured. He stood beside Sunstreaker and one hand rested on Sunstreaker's shoulder, squeezing warmly. "This is a momentous occasion."

"Yes, it is," Sunstreaker agreed, as the warmth and love of the Hive surrounded him, emanating from the floors, the walls, a rising hum of celebration from every member now connected to him, no matter how distant.

They were his family.

They were his home.

\*\*\*\*\*

## End Notes

Feedback, as always, is absolutely welcome and appreciated.

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